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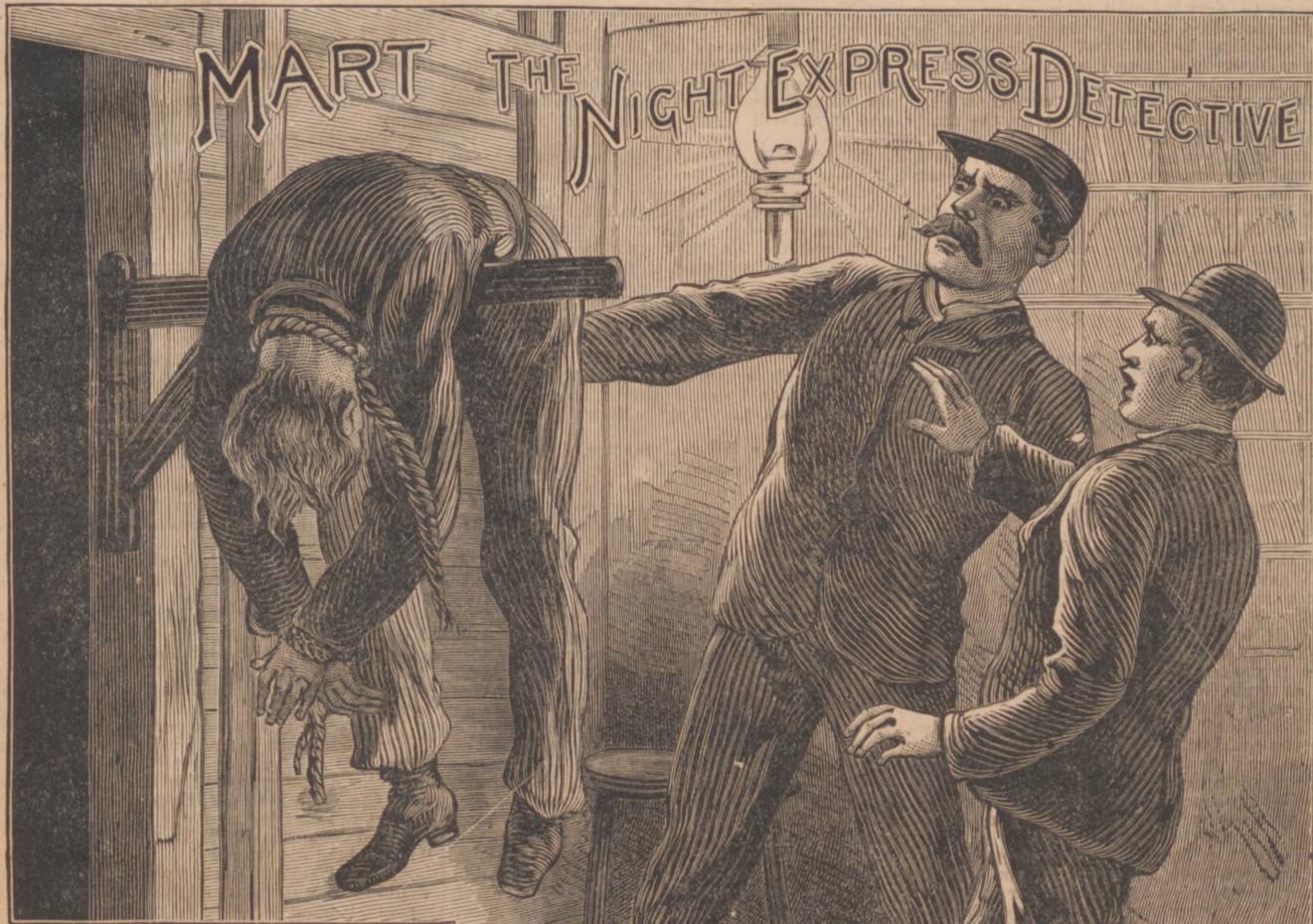
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OR,

THE MYSTERY AT SPRINGSIDE.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,

AUTHOR OF "THE ENGINEER DETECTIVE," "RED-LIGHT RALPH," "BROADWAY BILLY," "CIBUTA JOHN," "DISCO DAN," "RAINBOW ROB," "KENTUCKY JEAN," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FRIGHTFUL CATCH.

"ALL aboard!" Conductor Weston sung out, and he gave his pretty, nickel-plated lantern a skillful overhand swing, signaling the engineer to go ahead.

"Let 'er go, Gallagher!" another voice exclaimed, and a lad with a mail-bag on his shoulder came tearing around the corner of the station and across the platform.

THE NEXT INSTANT THE AGENT SWUNG THE CRANE DOWN, AND PULLED INTO THE CAR—NOT A MAIL-BAG, BUT THE CORPSE OF A MAN!

"You came mighty near getting left this time, Mart," the conductor remarked, swinging himself upon the step of the forward car of the already-moving train.

"It's all th' same as long as I didn't, though," the lad retorted, as he flung the mail-bag into the open door of the mail-car; "an' I reckon that old watch o' yours must be two or three seconds fast, more or less, anyhow; ain't it?"

By the time he had finished speaking the boy had swung himself aboard, the same as the conductor had done, and the train rolled out from the station.

"No, sir!" the conductor responded, in a cheery way; "my watch is just right to a tick. But, where are you going?" he inquired.

"Oh! I thought I'd take a ride down ter Clifton along o' my friend Henry."

"Have you a ticket?"

"Chestnuts!" the lad exclaimed, in response, and with a merry laugh he entered the car and made his way to the mail-room.

This lad was Martin Hardy, better known as "Mail-boy Mart." He was about seventeen years of age, of good build, and had a frank, honest face and a pair of bright eyes that were full of wide-awake spirit and gleaming with intelligence. He was employed by the railroad company to carry the mail between the station and the post-office, at Mapleton, and during the two years that he had served in that capacity he had never once missed making connection with a train.

Mart was a favorite with all who knew him, and especially with Henry Prentiss, the mail-agent on the Night Express.

Mart had a younger brother, Tommy, whom he sometimes engaged to carry the mail-bag from the station to the office, and on such occasions Mart would get aboard the train and ride down to Clifton, the terminus of the road, returning on the same train when it came back, along in the late hours; and as it was nearly a hundred miles from Mapleton to Clifton, it was quite a long ride.

When he entered the mail-room, on this occasion, he exclaimed:

"Hello! Mr. Prentiss; how are ye?"

"Ah, Mart, my boy!" the jolly agent responded; "going down with me again, are you? Well, you're welcome, and I'll make a route-agent of you one of these days."

"You can't please me better, nohow you can fix it," declared the boy. "I'd just like to be one of Uncle Sam's boys, an' ride in a snug little mail-room like this. I'm willin' ter learn th' biz, you bet!"

"You are one of Uncle Sam's boys, are you not?" the agent demanded.

"What! just to yank th' mail-bag from th' train to th' post-office an' from th' post-office to th' train? A heap of honor there is in that."

"Well, but that is a beginning, you know."

"Yes, it's beginnin', and that's all it is, too. If my pay was any smaller, I'd soon find myself in debt to the Government sure."

Agent Prentiss laughed.

"No matter," he said, "you had to creep before you could walk, and who knows but some day you will be postmaster-general? Stranger things have happened."

"Not very much stranger, though, I guess."

"By the way, who took the bag up to the office to-night?" the agent inquired.

"My brother, Tommy," Mart answered.

"Don't you know it is wrong for you, a sworn carrier, to let the mail go out of your hands?"

"Oh, Tommy an' me is one, an' I don't know but he's th' better of th' two. S'pose it ain't wrong for you ter let me ride in th' mail-room an' help sort mail, is it?"

The agent smiled.

"It isn't just according to Hoyle," he answered, "but then, I'm here to keep my eye upon you. Come, now, get up here and sort out these newspapers, and so ear' your passage. Don't you make a mistake, either, or I'll boot you."

"Same old chestnut," said Mart, as he set to work. "I'll trust myself as soon as anybody I know of."

In the mean time the train had gained in speed each moment, and it was now plunging ahead through the darkness at a high rate, leaving the town of Mapleton far behind.

Prentiss and the boy talked on as they worked, the agent seeing to it that Mart did not forget to work while he talked; and they were busy at both when there came a sharp, nervous rap at the mail-room door.

"Hello! who can that be?" the agent exclaimed. "It is not Weston or any of the train-men, that is certain."

Turning from his work for a second, he opened the door.

A stranger slipped quickly into the little compartment, shutting the door behind him.

He was a well-dressed man, with a full, black beard, and was about thirty-five years old, apparently.

"Are you the mail-agent?" he inquired, addressing Prentiss.

"Yes, sir," the agent answered briefly.

"Allow me a moment of y'ur time, then, if you please," the stranger went on. "I believe this train does not stop at Springside, does it?"

"No, sir, it does not. But, the conductor will give you whatever information you want."

"Yes, but it is you I want to see," the man insisted. "You exchange mail-bags at Springside, on the fly, do you not?"

"I do, sir."

"Have you yet sorted the Springside mail?"

"I am about done now."

"Good! Did you notice a letter addressed to M. Henry Paul, Springside?"

"To M. Henry Paul?" the agent repeated; "yes, I did notice such a name, I believe."

"Well," explained the stranger, "that is my name. I have been stopping all the summer at Springside. By the way, is that letter a large one?"

"Yes, quite large, sir. But, why do you ask these questions?"

"I will tell you. I am M. Henry Paul, as I said, and as this train does not stop at Springside, of course I cannot get off there. That letter, though, is of the greatest importance to me, and if you will kindly deliver it to me, I shall be—"

"Can't do it, sir," said Prentiss, firmly.

"Why not?"

"It is against the rules."

"I will give you ten dollars for that letter, my man, and—"

"Impossible, sir; it cannot be done. I do not know you, and even if I did I would not do it."

"I will give you fifty dollars—a hundred—for the letter."

"No use, sir; you cannot have it at any price."

"You may suspect that I am a contemptible spy, and that I am trying to trap you. Let me assure you that I am nothing of the sort, and—"

"No matter, sir, no matter," interrupted Prentiss, as he opened the door; "and as it is strictly against the rules for any passenger to ride in this room, I must request you to go out."

"Very well, I will go. I suppose this boy is not a passenger, since he is allowed in here."

"No, he is not; he is a sworn carrier."

"Oh! he is all right, then. Say, though, I will give you two hundred—"

"Not another word, sir. Go!"

The agent's manner showed that he meant "business" now, and the man retreated.

"Well, that yanks th' loaf!" exclaimed Mail-boy Mart. "What d'ye think o' sich a customer as that, Prenty?"

"He is a fraud, a fraud of the first water," the agent declared. "He is up to some sort of crooked work, that is certain."

"Don't ye think mebby he is a Government spotter?"

"Not he. If he was he would never have mentioned it. He might know I would be on the lookout then, if not before. No, he is a fraud, I believe, though it is barely possible that he is honest, and that the letter is of great importance to him. It is no business of mine, though, one way or the other."

While speaking thus, the agent was feeling into one of the bags that hung in a row along the side of the little room near his sorting-table.

Presently he drew forth a large, white envelope, well-filled and securely sealed.

"This is the letter," he said, as he looked at it.

"Quite a fat one, too," observed Mart.

"Yes," Prentiss agreed; "no doubt it contains legal documents of some kind, for it is marked 'From Higgins & Bondwell, New York.' They are the great criminal lawyers, you know."

"No, I don't know, Prenty, but I'll take yer word for it."

"You couldn't take anything better, I assure you. And now, see here; I want you to remember that I showed this letter to you, after the man tried to bribe me; that I put it back into the Springside bag, so; and that I locked the bag up at once, so."

Suiting actions to the words, the letter was put back into the bag from which it had been taken, and the bag was immediately locked.

"All right," said Mart; "I guess I can remember that."

"Of course you can. No knowing what may come of this, and, after you have seen, I want you to know just what I have done with the letter."

"We must be 'most to Springside now; ain't we?" Mart queried.

"Yes, I guess— Ah! there's the whistle now."

Out of the way and let me get to the door!"

Throwing open the side door of his little room, Prentiss put the mail-bag in the right position to push off at the right moment, and then grasped the handle of the "crane" to be ready to swing out its iron arm to catch the exchange-bag.

On sped the train, and in a moment more the little station was at hand. With a quick motion the agent pushed off the bag he had to deliver, and then with both hands swung out the crane to catch the one he was to receive.

A moment passed, and then came a shock that almost tore the crane from its fastenings. The next instant the agent swung the crane down, and pulled into the car—not a mail-bag, but the corpse of a man!

CHAPTER II.

IT IS A MYSTERY.

"Good Heavens!" cried Mail-boy Mart, as, filled with horror, he sprung away from the dead object.

"My God!" exclaimed the agent, "this is horrible!"

"Who is it?" asked Mart; "do you know him?"

"Yes, it is Old Roger, the mail-carrier," the agent answered, as he wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

At that instant there was a slight noise overhead.

Prentiss and Mart both glanced up, and they saw that the bell-rope had been pulled and was just being released.

Instantly followed a "toot" of the engine's whistle, then the car began to jolt and jar as the brakes were put on, and soon the train was stopped.

In a moment the trainmen were out to learn the cause, and Mail-boy Mart was about the first, being only too glad to get out of the mail-room and away from the corpse of the old carrier.

He had not waited to go through the car to the end door, but, after a quick glance to assure himself that he would land upon terra firma, had sprung out from the door of the mail-room.

As he did so he was just in time to see a man climb over a near-by fence and make off in the darkness.

The glimpse he got was but momentary, but it was sufficient for him to recognize the man as one whom he had seen before.

It was the man who had tried, only a short while previously, to bribe the mail-agent to deliver a letter to him!

"That's th' feller that pulled the string, an' I'll bet ten years' wages on it," the boy muttered.

"What's that you say?" demanded Prentiss, as he thrust his head out the door.

Mart repeated it.

"You bet heavily," Prentiss commented, "but, whom did you see?"

"Heavy!" cried Mart; "why anything less wouldn't be no bet at all! An' ter who I seen— Who d'ye s'pose?—but that feller that wanted ye ter give him that fat letter?"

"You don't say!"

"Well, I reckon I do, then; an', say, Prenty, I'm goin' ter stay here an' walk back to Springside."

"You are?"

"Yes; an' you leave word from me at Mapleton, when ye go back there, ter Tommy to carry th' mail till I turn up. I'm goin' ter inspect things round here, you bet! Just call me your Night Express Detective from this very hour."

"All right, I'll do so; but you are crazy to—"

They were interrupted.

Their exchange of words had occupied but a few brief seconds, and the conductor now came running up from the rear end of the train demanding:

"Who pulled that cord?"

"Didn't you?" called out the engineer, who had got down to see what was going on.

It was an unusual thing for the Night Express to be stopped by bell anywhere between stations.

"No!" retorted the conductor, "I didn't, and I'd like to know who did. We were behind

time as it was, and this will put us back still further."

"Hey, Weston!" the mail-agent called out; "Mart, here, says he saw a man climb over the fence and run away across the field. It must have been he who pulled the cord. But here is something worse than lost time; here is a *murder!*"

"A what?"

"A murder! When I put out the crane at Springside to catch the mail-bag, I caught a dead man instead. It is Old Roger, the carrier."

The stopping of the train was forgotten instantly, and all gathered around the door of the mail-car.

"My God!" exclaimed Weston, "you do not mean it, surely?"

"It is only too true," Prentiss insisted. "The old man's hands are tied behind him, and there is a rope around his neck. It is a clear case of brutal murder."

"By the Old Harry!" exclaimed the engineer, Tom Burgess, "no wonder I was startled. I thought it was a man instead of a mail-bag hanging on the stand, when the headlight fell upon it, but it was out of sight so quickly that I wasn't sure."

"Well, it was a man," declared Prentiss, "and here is the body. Poor Old Roger!"

The conductor, the engineer, and the other trainmen, hastened into the car, where they quickly realized the awful truth.

"By the Great Harry! but this is a heinous piece of work!" cried Tom Burgess. "It is a wonder the shock did not jerk the body in two."

"Are you sure he is dead?" asked Weston.

"Oh! he is certainly dead!" declared the mail-agent. "If he had been alive when I caught him, the shock would have killed him."

"No doubt you are right. Now, what is to be done? How far are we from Springside?"

"Almost a mile," answered Burgess.

"Then we can't flag back there, that is certain. The Express Freight is tearing along behind us, and will pass Springside in a few minutes. Call the flagman, Burgess, and go on to Crawford's."

"All right," responded the engineer, and he hurried out to his place upon the engine.

Four blasts of the whistle were quickly sounded, the flagman soon gave the signal to go ahead, and the train started on.

The conductor remained in the mail-room with the agent.

"What do you think about this case, anyhow, Prentiss?" he inquired.

"I don't know what to think about it," the agent replied, "It is a mystery. The only clear thing about it is that it is a case of murder. The fact that the man's hands are tied proves that."

"Yes, you are right there; but, who can have done it? and for what reason?"

"There you have me. I only wish I could tell you. The old man was liked by everybody, and had not an enemy in the world so far as I know. There is funny work afoot to-night, besides this case, though I cannot see how the other matter can have anything to do with the murder."

"What do you mean?"

"I will tell you. Just before we got to Springside a man came into the mail-room and tried to bribe me to give him a letter addressed to one M. Henry Paul, at Springside. He said he was the person the letter was for, and as he could not get off, and the letter being important, he wanted it. He offered me a hundred dollars for it."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"Then it shows fraud right on the face of it. Why did he not get off at Mapleton and hire a conveyance to bring him to Springside?"

"Right; or why not hire you to let him off there?"

"Sure enough; or, pull the cord and stop the—Hello! no doubt it was he who did pull the bell-rope."

"I believe it was."

"Why?"

"Because he is the man whom Mail-boy Mart saw getting over the fence."

"That settles it. The fellow, be he honest man or rascal, is bound to have that letter to-night. But, where is Mart now?"

"Oh! I forgot to tell you; he got off when we stopped, and said he was going back to Springside to play detective. I suppose he is trudging along toward the station now."

"Well, I wish him luck, but I fear he has gone on a fool's errand. It will require an older head than his to hunt the murderer down."

"So I think. He is a sharp lad, though, and he may be able to learn something that will give the detectives a clew."

"Perhaps."

"Well, come, we must get the body out of here, for if I do not go on with my work some station will not get any mail to-night. Like time and tide the U. S. Mail waits for no man."

"All right, catch hold."

The body was lifted up and carried out to the domain of the baggage-master, and the mail-agent resumed his work.

In the world of business, the living cannot stop long to mourn for the dead.

When the train arrived at Crawford's, and the crime was made known, there was a great excitement.

Crawford's was the county seat, and the body was left there to be taken in charge by the proper officials; and, after Conductor Weston had made a report of the case to the superintendent of the road, the train sped on its way.

The case was taken up by the county authorities immediately.

Crawford's was quite a little city in its way, and could boast of its quota of detective talent, so the case did not lack for that very essential article.

The coroner viewed the body at the station, and then gave permission for its removal.

It was taken at once to an undertaker's shop, and there the detective whom the coroner had appointed to investigate the matter began his work.

He viewed the body.

There was the mark of the rope around the neck, and also marks where it had been caught so violently by the mail-crane. The back was broken, and also the limbs in several places, all owing to the sudden contact with the car, no doubt.

No knife or bullet-wound could be found, but close examination disclosed a bruise on the head, made, probably, by some blunt weapon used to knock the old man senseless, but against which his hat had furnished some protection.

Another curious thing was the fact that the old man had not been robbed. A silver watch, which was crushed almost out of shape by the violent contact with the mail-crane, and also a pocketbook, with quite a sum of money, were found in his pockets.

Clearly no robbery had been intended, unless it was to rob him of the mail-bag.

If that was the case, why need his assailants have gone so far as to kill him?

It was a mystery.

The station at Springside was not kept open at night, so nothing could be learned by telegraph, and Jacob Raybold—such was the detective's name, took the first train that came along and went to the scene of the crime.

Altogether, it was a mysterious affair.

Was there any connection between the murderer and the fact that a stranger had tried to bribe the mail-agent to deliver a letter? It did not seem that there could be. But, what of the man who had offered the bribe, and what of the stopping of the train soon after it had passed Springside?

Jacob Raybold, the detective, had only the main fact—the fact of the crime—to work upon. He had learned nothing of the mysterious stranger who had stopped the train, or of the "important" letter in the mail that he had been so anxious to get hold of.

CHAPTER III.

MART IN A MESS.

In the mean time, what of Mail-boy Mart?

When the train went on, leaving him alone in the darkness, he turned and started back toward the Springside station.

From where the train had stopped, to the station, was quite a walk, being not far from half a mile, at least; for, going at such speed, the train had covered a great deal of ground between the time when the mail-crane caught the body of the old carrier and the time when the bell-cord was pulled, short as the interval was.

And it was not very pleasant walking either. The ties were uneven, and not at regular distances apart in all cases, and while they were too close together to admit of stepping on each one with ease, they were too far apart to allow the pedestrian to step upon every other one with anything like comfort.

The night being quite dark, too, the boy could see nothing beyond a dozen yards or so away in any direction, except the single light at the station and some other further away in the direction of the town.

Although the station was closed, the platform lamp had been left burning for the convenience of any passenger who might get off late trains, and that light as stated, was the nearest. The town of Springside was about half a mile away from the station, as is the case in a great many instances, especially on the larger railroads, the distance varying, of course; and the other lights were fully a mile away.

There were no houses near the station, and it was about as lonesome a spot, at night as can well be imagined.

Mail-boy Mart was, strictly speaking, no coward, and he trudged along manfully.

"This here," he mused, "is just about the strangest bit of queerness that I ever heard of. It is a mystery, sure as can be. What I want to find out now is who killed Old Roger, an' what they killed him for. Kin I do it? That remains to be seen later on. One thing is sure, though, an' that one thing is just this: If there is somebody goin' round killin' mail carriers, I want to stop him. I'm a carrier myself, an' I ain't got no desire to be hung up on a mail-stand to be raked in by a mile-a-minute train; good gracious, no!"

"It was not a pleasing prospect, certainly, and no wonder the boy felt a chill creep up his back at the thought of it.

He pressed onward at a rapid pace, and ere long arrived at the station. He did not, though, advance upon the platform, but stopped at a little distance away.

"Now," he mused, "how am I to go ahead with this little game? I don't want to run right up an' put my foot right in it—good gracious, no! Fer that reason I must be careful. No knowin' but them fellers that killed Old Roger is around here yet, an' I mustn't make myself too cornspeckers. It might not be good fer my health. I guess I'd better keep out of the shine of that platform-lamp, so I'll just leave the track an' go round 'hind th' station, an' so on up to th' mail-stand."

This was a sensible course for him to pursue. He would not be so likely to be seen.

Leaving the track, he sprung up the low bank on the side the station was on, advanced to a fence, and then climbed into an adjacent field.

Once over the fence he moved silently forward, and was soon behind the station.

The station stood back several feet into the field, and the fence had been built around it.

Between the building and the fence was a space four or five feet wide, which, directly behind the station, was filled up with old boxes and barrels.

The platform of the station ran very nearly all around, but on the rear side it was not more than three feet wide. In the middle of the narrow rear platform were two flights of stairs, one leading to a loft over the station-room, and the other to a sort of cellar underneath.

When Mail-boy Mart came directly behind the station, he thought he heard voices.

He stopped instantly and listened.

There was no mistaking it, and the voices, very low in tone, seemed to come from immediately under the station.

In point of fact, the speakers were two men who were seated at the bottom of the steps that led down to the cellar—or, as it more properly was—the coal-hole.

Mail-boy Mart sunk down to the ground, silently, and crept to the fence.

It was too dark, there in the shadow of the station, for him to see much, but he could make out the line of the narrow platform, the stairs, and the pile of boxes and barrels.

He could not, though, see the two men.

Down where they sat all was inky darkness. Besides, the boxes and barrels were in the way.

The boy listened intently, but at first he could not catch a word.

Presently the men pitched their voices a little higher.

"Ha, ha, ha!" one laughed, "he did look comical, Bob, didn't he!" not interrogatively.

"Bob" chuckled for a moment and then responded.

"He did, Hank, for a fact."

"There we hung," the first speaker went on, "as stiff an' still as a mummy from th' land o' Yejup. Then along kem that 'ar mail-ketcher, reached out its arm and doubled him up like a jack-knife, an' then pulled him in like a schoolboy ketchin' flies. Ha, ha, ha! if he wasn't quite dead yet, it must ha' jerked his soul out lightnin' quick. I'll bet it broke every bone in his body."

Mail-boy Mart's hair, for the moment, stood on end.

Here he was, within a dozen feet of the very men who had done the horrible deed of blood.

It was enough to have quickened the pulse of a veteran detective.

The boy quickly made up his mind to two things. He must, if possible, learn the names of these men, and at all risks he must shadow them until he could get a look at their faces.

He listened intently to catch every word he could.

"He was dead enough afore, though," remarked he called Bob.

"Oh, yes, he was dead, sure! He'd been hangin' there long enough ter kill two men."

" Didn't he fight hard, though?"

" You're right he did. When I tapped him with th' billy, though, he caved."

" Well, I should say he did. You don't hit light when you play th' joker, you don't. Ha, ha, ha!"

" An' then you hit onto th' idea o' puttin' him onto that mail-bag jigger. I'd ruther tickled him with a knife an' left him right there; but, as you said, blood is purty apt ter git onter a feller when he sticks a pig, an' blood ain't good ter carry round on yer clothes. Besides, there was heaps more' o' fun your way."

" Well, rawthur. But what is ter be our next move?"

" Hang me if I rightly know. It won't do to hang round here long, fer when Old Mail-bags—"

" Ha, ha, ha! what a name!"

"—When he don't show up at th' town after a reasonable time, somebody'll come down ter look fer him, more'n likely, an' we want ter be scarce 'round here by that time. What we want most is ter git back to New York."

Their tones were a little lower agaiu, and Mail-boy Mart stretched his ear—as the saying is—to the utmost to catch every word.

Grasping the fence firmly, he slowly and silently raised himself up a little.

The fence was one of the old-fashioned "worm-fence" kind.

It must be kept in mind that this little station was right in the midst of fields and farms—as it were, with no house near.

Having raised himself upon his knees, the boy put his head and shoulders between the rails of the fence and leaned forward as far as he could with safety.

He was careful not to make any noise, and felt sure that the men he was listening to could see no better in the dark than he could.

" Have ye got that 'ar time-table?" were the next words he caught.

" Yes, Bob, I've got it," was the reply, " but it ain't o' much use in this here darkness. Why, what of it? I hope ye don't 'spose I'm crazy enough ter stay round here ter git a train, do ye?"

" No, in course not; but I was jest a-thinkin' that we could see how far it is to th' next station, an' walk there. Then we could lay low there till a freight comes along, an' board that."

" It hain't safe ter fool round th' railroad, no way ye kin fix it."

" I know it ain't *here*, but if we, git away from here soon's we kin, an' git onto a train at some other station, who kin say we had a hand in th' job?"

" That's all right, but how be we ter see th' time-table?"

" I've got matches."

" An' would ye rekit it ter light one here?"

" Yes. Ye see, we're down here in a sort o' hole, an' no one kin see us unless he's right close by."

" And some one may be."

" Tain't likely, or we'd 'a' heard 'em."

" Well, strike a match, then; but shade th' glim a little with yer hat. If any other feller comes pokin' his nose 'round, we'll serve him same as we did Old Mail-bags."

" You kin bet we will. Old Mail-bags wouldn't got hurt if he hadn't went to pokin' his nose inter our business. Thet other job would 'a' went off prime only for him."

" To be sure it would. It is all done, though, an' th' witness has been taken keer of. We sent him to Kingdom Come."

" An' sent him by mail, too!"

" Ha, ha, ha!"

The one called Bob now struck a match, and Hank drew a time-table from his pocket and opened it.

Between two of the empty barrels, Mail-boy Mart caught sight of two of the most villainous faces he had ever seen.

He drew back with a shudder, but instantly leaned forward again, being anxious to catch every word and feeling sure that he would not be seen.

Two or three matches were burned, and then Hank signified that he was done and folded the time-table up.

" Well," queried Bob, as he extinguished the last match, " what is it?"

" I can't make much head or tail out of it," Hank confessed; " but I believe there is a freight comes along here about midnight. An', as near as I kin figger it out, th' next nearest station to 'rds New York is 'bout seven miles away."

" Then we'd better make a start fer that station, fer it must be after ten o'clock."

" Yes, we'll be goin'. What be we ter do wi' these two mail-lags, though?"

" Have ye got 'em both?"

" Yes; th' one they threw off th' train almost knocked me down where I was a-standin', I fetched it along. We must git rid of 'em, fer they ain't safe fer us ter handle. Shall we pitch 'em inter thet old well?"

Their tones were quite low again, and in his anxiety to hear, Mail-boy Mart leaned a little further forward.

Suddenly there was a crash. The rail he was leaning on gave way without warning, and he dived forward into the boxes and barrels, forcing them down into the hole upon the heads of the two men.

CHAPTER IV.

A HORRIBLE FATE.

THE crash was a sudden and startling one, and the two murderers were no less frightened than was Mail-boy Mart.

The rail of the fence was rotten, and when it gave way it was without any warning. There was a crash, and the mischief was done.

As soon as Mart felt himself going he made desperate grabs to get hold of something to save him from falling down where the two villains were.

But he could get hold of nothing any more substantial than the empty boxes and barrels, and they, having been piled up anyhow, tumbled over as soon as he touched th'm.

Crash! bang! bump! and down he went.

At the very first sound, both of the two murderers attempted to spring up, but before they could do so the boxes and barrels, and the boy, too, were upon them.

" Thunder 'n' lightnin'!" exclaimed Bob, " what 'n' blazes has broke loose?"

" Ther's somebody heur," declared Hank, " an' he's knocked down these boxes. Dast it! I believe every tooth is knocked out o' my head!"

" An' my head is 'most broke," complained Bob.

It was all over, and the two rascals began to struggle to get out from under the pile.

Mail-boy Mart was now standing, head down, in one of the barrels.

He dared not move, for fear of being discovered, and his position was anything but comfortable.

He was in a delicate dilemma.

A moment passed.

" Say, Hank," villain Bob then said, " these here things must ha' fell o' their own sweet will. No person has made a move yit."

" That's all right," responded Hank; " he'd be a fool if he did, if he's been spyan' on us. It may be ez you say, but I mean ter know 'fore I go away from here, you bet!"

" I think we'd better git out o' here jest as soon as we kin."

" That's all right, but I ain't goin' till I know what made these boxes fall. If somebody has been listenin' to what we said, and has seen our faces, that somebody has got ter die."

Mart felt that he was gone.

Still, though, he remained perfectly quiet, and made up his mind to continue so as long as he could.

It was just possible that they might not find him.

" But how be ye goin' ter find him?" queried Bob. " It won't do ter fool round here long, an' it won't do ter make too much of a light. If ye take my advice we'll skip out ter wunst."

" Now ye mought jest ez well shut up, fer I tell ye I'm goin' ter investigate this thing. I don't do things by halves, I don't, an' if there's any feller hidin' under these boxes an' bar'l's, he will furnish another bait fer th' mail-bag holder."

Mart's heart beat as though it meant to break his ribs, and he felt a chill playing up and down his back.

It was a terrible moment for him.

Standing on his head in the narrow confines of a barrel, all pressed down in a heap from the force of his fall, it seemed as though his neck was being slowly twisted out of joint.

But still he remained silent.

" Confound th' luck," he heard Hank mutter, after he had moved two or three of the boxes and another avalanche of them came down, " there must be a million o' th' blained things! How be we ter git out o' here?"

" Oh! we kin git out fast enough," Bob assured, " if that is all ye want. We kin jest climb over 'em an' let 'em lay. An' we'd better be doin' it, too. If somebody did push 'em down on us, mebby he's gone off fer help ter scoop us in. I think we'd better dust out, doublequick."

" I don't know but you're more'n half right, but it ain't safe ter take no chances on this biz. Remember we have showed our faces."

" Well, if ye're bound ter hunt round a little, let's stop chionin' an' do it. Ketch on, an' fire out th' boxes. It won't do ter make too much noise about it, though."

Mail-boy Mart heard them set to work, then, to remove the rubbish.

The barrel which he was in had fallen to the bottom of the hole, and the men were now not two feet away from him.

In fact, he now and then felt them rub against the barrel as they moved about.

To make matters worse, he knew that unless they went away pretty soon he would have to make known his presence. His neck was so cramped that he could not stand the pain much longer.

Presently one of the men caught hold of that very barrel and gave it a jerk.

It was Hank.

" Hello!" he exclaimed, " here's a bar'l wi' somethin' in it."

Instantly he let go his hold and thrust in his hand, and Mart felt the hand grab his leg.

" By smoke!" Hank cried out, " I was right. Here's a boy in this here bar'l, head down."

" Th' deuce there is," from Bob.

" There is, fer a fact. Jest light a match fer one second till I yank him out."

Bob obeyed, and Hank pulled Mart out of the barrel.

It was a great relief to the boy at first, but he realized fully the danger that now threatened him.

The moment he was placed upon his feet Hank clutched his throat with no gentle grasp and looked at him.

" Say, you young whelp," he cried, as Bob put out the match, " what be ye doin' herc?"

" Please, sir," Mart gasped, " I was asleep in a box."

" Oh! ye was, was ye?"

" Yes."

" Well, mebby you're tellin' th' truth, but that don't help yer case any; hey, Bob?"

" Not a bit," declared Bob.

" Boy," Hank hissed, " you've got ter die."

" Oh! please don't kill me," Mart cried out: " please don't."

" We don't like to do it, but it's got ter be did. Mebby you was asleep an' didn't hear nothin', an' mebby ye wasn't; we can't tell, an' so we've got ter make sure of ye."

Mart now attempted to scream for help, but Hank almost choked the breath out of him.

" Don't ye holler, ye little fool!" he hissed, " or I'll choke th' life right out o' ye. Chokin' is the very worst kind o' way ter die. If ye'll be a good little boy, we'll kill ye in a good deal easier way nor what chokin' is; hey, Bob?"

" You bet we will," Bob returned; " we'll send him out o' the world by mail."

" Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Hank, " that's a good way, but we hain't got th' time now ter tend to it. We'll have ter do it slick an' quick."

" That's so," Bob agreed; " an' th' slicker an' quicker we do it th' better."

It would be folly to say that Mail-boy Mart was not frightened, for he was, and badly, too.

And well he might be. He knew that he could expect no mercy from such men, and believed that his time had come.

He tried to plead for his life, but Hank kept such a firm clutch upon his throat that he could not utter a word.

In fact, he was hardly able to get any breath.

" You're right," Hank said, " for we can't fool round here no longer." And then in a lower tone, which was only too painfully audible to Mart, he added:

" Jest take that tickler o' yourn an' tickle him a little between th' left ribs while I hold him. Then we'll leave him right here."

Imagine yourself Mart.

His heart seemed to stop beating, and drops of cold perspiration started out upon his face.

For one instant the suspense was horrible, for he expected nothing less than to feel the keen blade of a knife thrust into his body.

The suspense was but momentary, however,

and then came the other rascal's reply, like a pardon to a man condemned.

"No, siree!" Bob exclaimed, "not *that* way. We're a long jump from bein' out o' the woods, an' I tell ye it won't do ter have any signs o' bleed about us."

"That's so, that's so," Hank agreed. "I see. But, how then? fer it's got ter be did, sure."

"Let's serve him same as we did th' other feller."

"I tell ye we hain't got time."

"Oh! I don't mean th' mail-bag jigger; I mean th'—"

"Oh! I see, sez th' blind man. That will do fu'st rate. It'll be better than th' knife, by a long sight. There won't be any tell-tale marks."

Mail-boy Mart wondered what his fate was to be.

Their next words gave him an idea of it in all its horror.

"An' then," said Bob, "we kin throw th' mail-bags in at th' same time."

"Jest so," agreed Hank, "bein' as we was goin' ter do it anyhow."

Mart had heard them speak about throwing the bags into an old well.

Clearly that was what they now meant to do with him.

In the corner of the adjoining field, let us explain, had once stood a house. Fire had long since made it a tuing of the past, and destructive boys and worse tramps had torn down and put the out-buildings to a similar fate. The old well, though, remained, and was covered over with a number of heavy boards.

It was this well the two villains had in mind.

Without any further delay they forced a gag into the boy's mouth, and then tied his hands. This done, they secured his feet, and he was rendered perfectly helpless.

"Now, my lad," advised Hank, "if you know any purty little pra'rs, you'd better be thinkin' 'em over. You'll soon be where ye can't say 'em no more. We really hate to cut ye off in yer buddin' youth, but stern necessity compels."

The two rascals then set to work to clear away the boxes and barrels so that they could get out with their burden.

When this was done, Hank went out first to look around.

He soon returned.

"Not a sound to be heard," he reported, "an' now for it. Git hold."

They lifted Mart up, then, and carried him up and out into the field.

Once there, they turned in the direction of the old well, and soon found it.

"It's lucky th' boss told us about this old well," Hank remarked, as they laid the boy down, "fer it is mighty handy."

Despite his immediate peril, Mart wondered who "the boss" could be.

But he had little time for reflection.

The boards were soon removed from over the dismal hole, and then the boy was picked up. For an instant the two fiends held him suspended over it, head downward, and then they let him fall.

CHAPTER V.

THE DETECTIVE AT WORK.

In a moment more the murderers heard the body strike the bottom.

Then they listened.

Not a sound came up out of the dark depths.

"He's done fer," whispered Bob.

"Yes, deader'n a hammer," Hank coincided.

"Pitch in the bags, then, an' we'll be gittin' away from here. I've got no love fer the place, you bet."

"Nor I. In they goes," throwing down the mail bags, one after the other, "an' now let's cover th' hole up."

Hurriedly but carefully they put the boards back into place, and then turned away and hastened toward the railroad at a point some distance above the station.

"I don't s'pose we kin hide our marks at that well," Hank observed, as they hastened on.

"We won't try to, you kin bet," said Bob.

"In course not; but what I mean, I s'pose our tracks kin be seen, an' that th' boards over th' well will show that they've been lifted."

"Yes, no doubt, but it's too late to think o' that now. They won't be likely ter find anything out afore mornin', an' by that time I hope we'll be all safe."

So they talked on until they came to the railroad, and then they turned to the eastward and made all haste away from the scene of their crime.

An hour later a train bound east stopped at Springside.

There was but one passenger to get off, and that one was Jacob Raybold, the detective.

Quite a group of men stood on the platform, and no sooner had the train stopped than they pressed forward around the conductor, and one of them asked:

"Conductor, have you got any mail aboard for this place? We didn't get any from the Express, or leastwise our old carrier can't be found."

"Old Roger is dead," said the conductor.

"Dead!" they all cried, "how do you know?"

"Everybody on the road knows it," the conductor returned. "He was killed and hung up on the mail-stand, or was hanged there and so killed, and when the Express came along the mail-agent caught him with the crane."

"Good heavens! and where is he now?"

"At Crawford's."

The little group of citizens looked at one another in surprise and horror.

"We knowed somethin' must be wrong," one remarked, "but we didn't look for nothin' like this."

"And this accounts for the missing mail-bag," said another. "Old Roger has been killed."

"You have hit it right, I guess," the conductor confirmed. "No doubt some evil tramps have killed the old man to get possession of the mail-bags, and have put the body on the mail-stand out of pure cussedness. I hope you'll find out who did it."

All this occupied but a minute or less, and saying good-night the conductor shouted "all aboard!" gave his lantern a swing and the train started on.

Two or three of the men who had come out in search of the old carrier had lanterns with them and as soon as the train had started on the rest of the group collected around these two or three to decide what they should do.

Jacob Raybold joined them and listened to the theories they advanced and the plans they suggested.

It was some time before they noticed that there was a stranger among them.

When the discovery was made, all eyes were turned on him.

"Mister," one asked, "who are you?"

"Am I the only stranger among you?" the detective counter-questioned.

The men with the lanterns looked around at the other faces.

"Yes," was the reply, "you are."

"Then you are all citizens of Springside?"

"Yes, we are; but you haven't answered my question."

"I will do so now. I am Jacob Raybold, the detective."

This was said in a lower tone.

The citizens looked the surprise and awe they felt.

"Be you, really?" one innocently asked, half-doubtfully.

"I surely am," the great (?) detective assured, "and I am here to find out who killed your old carrier."

"Good!" exclaimed the group.

"Yes, and I want you to assist me," the detective went on.

"And that we will!" the first speaker exclaimed.

"May I ask who you are?" inquired the detective.

"I am John Larkspur, the postmaster at Springside," was the reply.

"And I am Ward Jacobs, the station-agent," another volunteered.

"Just the two I wanted to see," said Raybold.

"How is it," inquired the postmaster, "that you learned of the murder and got here so soon? I suppose, though, you were at Crawford's," he added, "and have just come from there."

"You guess rightly, sir; and now, if you are ready, let us begin our work."

"We are ready."

"In the first place, let me ask a question or two."

"Go ahead."

"Has any one of you any suspicion as to who can have done the deed?"

"There is where you've got us, I guess, sir," answered the postmaster. "I haven't the ghost of an idea."

There were several "no's," but no one answered "yes."

"Had the old man any enemies?" was the next question.

"Not one," answered the postmaster, positively.

The others were of the same opinion.

"It is not necessary to ask whether he was rich, for his humble position goes to prove that he was not."

"No," the postmaster agreed, "he was not by any means rich. He owned, however, a little house and lot, lived all alone, and, as he was very saving, generally carried quite a sum of money with him."

"His watch and pocketbook were found in his pockets, and his money was safe."

"Then he was not killed for that."

"Decidedly not."

"And what is *your* idea about it?" the station-agent inquired.

"Well," responded the detective, "I think we shall have to start upon the theory that he was killed for the mail-bag."

"I can't see what else it could be for."

"A tramp, or a party of tramps, perhaps," the detective went on, "have met him and demanded the bag, and the old man refusing and doing his best to defend it, they have killed him. Then, not knowing how to dispose of the body, the idea has come to them to hang it up on the mail-stand."

"That sounds reasonable enough," the station-agent here remarked, "but at the same time I think tramps would have been likely to go through his pockets, would they not?"

The detective was thoughtful.

"You are right," he acknowledged, "they certainly would. It may be, though, that they were frightened off before they had time to do it," he added.

"I do not think so," the agent again opposed.

"You do not?"

"No."

"And why not?"

"For this reason: If they had time to hang him to the arm of the mail-stand, they certainly had time to go through his pockets; and if they intended robbing him at all, would they not have attended to that first? It seems to me so."

Jacob Raybold was considerably nettled.

To have any one give him points in his own line of business, was not to his liking. He evidently thought he "knew it all," and wanted others to think the same.

As it was, though, he could not deny the force of the station-agent's argument, and so said:

"Your ideas are clear, sir, and they seem to put the tramp theory under cover."

"I think so, too," agreed the postmaster.

"Then," said Raybold, "we must look for some one who might have had an object in robbing the mail."

"But how are we to find such a person?" questioned the postmaster.

"That remains to be seen. Perhaps you can give me a clew."

"I?"

"Yes."

"How can I give you a clew?"

"Do you know of any one who was expecting money by mail to-night?"

"No, sir."

"Is there any one at Springside who receives money by mail in large sums?"

"No, sir."

"Well, let us try again. Was any one, to your knowledge, expecting an important letter to-night—important papers—anything?"

"No, sir—not—Yes, there was, now I come to think of it."

"Ha! this is encouraging. Who was it?"

"It was Mr. Paul, who has been at the Eagle Hotel all summer."

"What was he looking for?"

"A large letter."

"Tell me what you know about Mr. Paul, and also about his expected letter."

"Well, the gentleman's full name is Mr. M. Henry Paul. He is a man of means, and has been at the Eagle all the season. He happened into the office this morning, and said:

"Mr. Larkspur," said he, "I expect a rather bulky letter to-day, or within a day or two at most. When it comes, please hold it here and I will call for it. Do not send it to the hotel."

"All right, sir," said I, "I will hold it for you."

"It will be from Higgins & Bondwell, New York," said he, "so you can't mistake it."

"All right," said I, "I'll look out for it."

"And that's about all, sir."

"And that is quite enough," declared Raybold. "I must see Mr. Paul."

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed one of the group; "you don't suppose he killed the man, do you?"

"No; but some one else may have been interested in that letter, and waylaid the old carrier in order to gain possession of it before it could fall into its owner's hands."

"There may be something in that," the others agreed.

"At any rate, it will pay me to see Mr. Paul, I think," the detective added. "But now let us set to work to see what we can learn around here. We may find some clew that will put the key to the mystery right into our hands. You, Mr. Jacobs, being agent here, must know every foot of the ground quite well. Please lead the way to the place where the body was caught by the mail train."

"All right, follow me," said the agent, and he stepped down from the platform and started up the track.

CHAPTER VI.

WHERE IS HENRY PAUL?

DETECTIVE RAYBOLD, the postmaster, and the others followed the agent's lead.

When they arrived at the mail-stand the agent stopped and said:

"This is the place."

The detective looked at the queer-looking device for a moment in silence.

Presently he said:

"I cannot see where the man was hung up on that thing."

"The arm is now hanging down," the agent explained. "As soon as the weight is taken off it falls."

"Oh! I see!"

Taking the postmaster's lantern, the detective ascended the three or four steps that led to the little platform and proceeded to examine the peculiar contrivance critically.

He discovered—nothing.

"There is nothing to be learned here," he announced, as he descended.

"Well, where to next?" the agent inquired.

"Suppose we look around and see if we can find any marks of a struggle."

"All right."

"Do you know which way the old carrier usually approached the stand?"

"Yes," the agent explained, "he always came straight down the road, turned the corner of this fence, and then walked along to this point."

"Then we must look for signs somewhere along that fence, or along the road," the detective remarked; and still retaining the postmaster's lantern, he and the agent led the way.

They followed the little path along the fence until they came to the road, and proceeded up the road for quite a distance, but they could find no unusual marks to arouse suspicion.

The weather had been very dry of late, and in the heavy dust of the country road all tracks were alike.

And there were many of them.

When they had gone quite a distance, the postmaster called a halt, saying:

"If we go on we shall soon reach the town. Shall we go on, Mr. Raybold, or shall we go back to the station?"

"We may as well go on," the detective answered. "It is poor satisfaction to search around here by lamp-light, and besides I want to see that Mr. Paul."

"On we go, then."

"In the morning, when we can see what we are doing, then we can come and look for the missing mail-bag."

They were just starting on when a noise in the direction of the station caused them to stop and listen.

"What was that?" the detective demanded.

"I don't know," the postmaster responded.

"It sounded holler like an empty bar'l or box," one ventured.

"There is a pile of old boxes and barrels behind the station," said the agent, "and it may be some one has moved them—or some of them, by accident or otherwise."

The cause of the noise is easily explained.

One of the heavy boxes had been left in such a precarious position, by the two villains who had recently been buried under them, that its falling was only a question of time.

Now it had slipped and fallen, carrying several more along with it.

"We must go back and see," said the detective, promptly.

They turned back at once.

When they neared the station again the detective drew a revolver and prepared to face any one who might come.

This country detective's way of doing things would have caused a city professional to smile.

Reaching the station they advanced upon the platform, and then the agent led the way around to the rear where the boxes and barrels lay.

"Some one has been here, that is sure," he remarked. "This rubbish was piled up against

the fence, and now it is all down against the cellar door."

"Perhaps it has been pushed down there for a purpose," observed Raybold. "We must move it and find out. There may be something or somebody under it."

"I think I can explain the whole thing, now," ventured the postmaster.

"You can?" from the detective.

"Yes."

"Well, what is your idea?"

"I see the fence there is broken. Did you notice that?"

None of the others had.

"So it is!" exclaimed the agent. "How do you account for that?"

"Cattle."

"Cattle?"

"Yes. You know this field is used for pasture, and no doubt a cow has strayed around here, hit the fence, and so caused the noise by breaking the rail and knocking over the boxes. If I am not mistaken there are some cows standing out there now; are there not?"

The others looked out into the darkness in the direction in which he pointed, and all agreed that he was right.

This seemed so entirely reasonable that it was accepted at once as the true explanation of the noise, and laughing over their "fool's errand," as they called it, the party once more turned their steps toward the town.

Little did they dream of the true state of affairs.

In due time they reached the post-office, where the postmaster explained what had taken place.

Late as the hour was, a great many citizens were still at the office awaiting the coming of the mail.

In a country town like Springside, if the mail arrived at three o'clock in the morning, somebody would be sure to be found waiting up for it.

The news created a great excitement, as can well be imagined, and for once the easy-going monotony of life in that quiet little town was effectively broken.

And no one showed greater surprise or concern than did St. Edmund Dare, the rich owner of Dare Manor at Springside.

A few words concerning this gentleman are necessary to the proper unfolding of our story.

Dare Manor was one of the finest old homesteads in the State, and, in all, about a thousand acres of land belonged to the estate. St. Edmund, the only child of his parents, who were now dead, had left home at the age of fifteen to go to sea. His father had not opposed him, as he was one who believed in allowing boys to follow the bent of their own inclinations. He had, however, taken the precaution to engage a trusted friend to follow the boy in his wanderings, unbeknown to the lad, to watch over and protect him.

For several years young St. Edmund was heard from frequently, now in one part of the world and again in another, and his father received favorable reports from the guardian, who had made the boy's acquaintance by this time, gained his friendship, and was his accepted companion.

Finally all letters ceased, and neither the boy nor the guardian friend was heard from again for years.

Time passed, and Mr. and Mrs. Dare aged rapidly, mourning constantly the loss of their well-loved son, and at last they died.

A year later the boy and his guardian friend returned, only to find the manor in the care of servants, and no other kindly face to greet them.

The travelers told a remarkable story of shipwreck and captivity in a wild foreign land, and the grief of the young man was deep and sincere.

He proved his identity to the satisfaction of the legal authorities, and was put into possession of the estate, and, asking his traveling companion to join him, settled down to the quiet life the manor afforded.

His friend and guardian, whose name, by the way, was Hammond, had now confessed the part he had been playing, and the young heir thought none the less of him for the deception.

We call him the "young man" still, when, in point of fact, he was now thirty, having been absent from home full fifteen years.

A year after their return, Hammond suddenly died, and since his death to the time of our story St. Edmund had lived alone, managing well the large estate and making himself almost as popular with the majority of his fellow-citizens as Squire Dare had been before him.

He was now a man of thirty-five, wore a full, black beard, and was always faultlessly dressed.

On this eventful night he had dropped into the post-office, as he sometimes did when in the village late enough for the last mail, to inquire whether there were any letters for him.

He was told that the carrier, Old Roger, had not arrived with the bag.

Time passed, and all present began to wonder why the old man did not come.

"Perhaps," some one suggested, "the train is late."

"No," some one else averred, "for I was down to Ben Giles's house when it passed. It stopped after it was past the station, too, though of course I don't know what for."

After waiting a little longer it was suggested that some one should go in search of the old carrier.

This was instantly agreed to, and several men set out at once, including the postmaster and the station-agent.

When they returned, and Detective Raybold with them, and the startling news was known, St. Edmund Dare was, as stated, much concerned.

"There is something back of all this," he declared, "and the truth must be brought out. That honest old man must and shall be avenged."

Asking Larkspur for a large sheet of paper, St. Edmund busied himself over it with pen and ink for some minutes, and then posted it on the wall.

It read as follows:

\$500 REWARD!

"The above-named reward will be paid to any person who will give information that will lead to the arrest and conviction of the murderer of Roger Blake."

ST. EDMUND DARE.

"There," he said, addressing the detective, "there is a trifling inducement for you to do your best, sir."

"That is what I always do, sir," the detective responded, "and I hope I shall be able to claim the reward you offer."

"I hope you will be," St. Edmund rejoined; and after a little further conversation he left the office and set out for home.

Now could Mail boy Mart have been permitted to be present, he could have declared, unhesitatingly, that this St. Edmund Dare was the very man who had tried to bribe Henry Prentiss to deliver a letter to him on the train, saying that his name was M. Henry Paul; and who, a little later on, had stopped the train and run away across the fields.

Would the boy have been mistaken?

It is certain that no one would have believed his story.

And the detective—he lost no time in setting out to find M. Henry Paul.

But he did not find him. He was not at the hotel, and no one could tell where he was. The last that had been seen of him was when, just a little while before Old Roger went down with the mail-bag, he was seen going in the direction of the station.

CHAPTER VII.

A COMPANION IN DISTRESS.

WITHOUT further delay we must return to Mail-boy Mart.

Was he dead?

If such had been the case this history would bear another name.

No, he was not dead, but, thanks to an ever-watchful Providence, very much alive.

Let us explain.

When he felt himself falling down, down, into the dark and dismal hole, he had no hope of ever seeing another day.

He gave himself up as lost.

A thousand thoughts rushed into his mind, he lived again his short career, and every act of his life, almost, came to him with startling vividness.

Could it be that this was to be his fate? Must he perish thus? Alas! there was no ray of hope, and he bade a silent farewell to house and friends.

The sensation of falling seemed to be a never-ending age, though it was but one short second of duration in fact, and then he fell head-first into the water at the bottom.

Bound and gagged as he was, what possible chance had he for escape?

Unaided, none.

No sooner was he under the water, though, than he felt a hand grab him by the leg.

Was he not mistaken? Did he not imagine it? It seemed too good to be true.

True it was, though, and he felt himself pulled around and turned right end up.

His ideas were a little confused at first, for, although the water had broken his fall to a considerable extent, his head had come into quite violent contact with the sandy bottom.

When placed upon his feet he found that the water came about up to his shoulders.

His rescuer, whoever he was, held him firmly, but did not speak.

He remained silent for some little time, until the rascals above had replaced the boards, in fact, and then he spoke.

"Boy," he demanded, "who are you?"

Mart could not very well reply, having a gag in his mouth.

"Can't you speak?" the rescuer insisted.

He was holding the boy by the shoulders, and the only reply he got was to feel the shoulders move.

Mart moved to let him know that he heard but was powerless to reply.

The man passed one hand up to his face, and discovered the gag.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "no wonder you did not reply. I'll have this thing off in one minute. Whoever threw you down here evidently meant to make sure of your not getting away. There, now you can speak, I guess."

Mart tried it and found that he could.

"Thank th' Lord you was here, whoever ye be," were his first words. "I reckon I'd been a goner if you hadn't been; goodness, yes!"

"But, who are you?" the man asked again.

"Well, my name is Martin Hardy, but I'm a heap better known as Mail-boy Mart."

"That is a queer name. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Mapleton. Say, though, just free my hands and feet, if ye can, and then I kin talk better I know."

"Well, you are tied up well, I must say. I will free you if I can, and then you and I must understand each other. What are these things that were thrown down after you? One almost cracked my head. Why, they are mail-bags! Do you have anything to do with the mail?"

"Yes, sir; I am the carrier at Mapleton. That's where I got my name of Mail-boy Mart." "Oh! I see. Well, let me try to set you free, now, so far as the use of your limbs is concerned. Whether we shall ever get out of here, though, is the important question."

How this man could talk so calmly, standing waist-deep in almost ice-cold water, Mart could not understand. His, Mart's, teeth were rattling like castanets.

The man reached down and carefully cut the cords that bound the lad's wrists, and then lifted him up, told him to hold fast to his shoulders and draw up his feet, and then did the same to the cords that bound his ankles.

"There," he remarked, "now you are as free as I am, which is not saying a great deal."

"Thanks," said Mart, gratefully; "an' now may I ask who you be?"

"You may, certainly. We are brothers in misery, and we should be agreeable. My name is M. Henry Paul."

"M. Henry Paul!"

"Yes; why do you repeat it in that tone?"

Of course it was totally dark down there, and neither could see the other.

"Why," Mart explained, "I was wondering how you could git around here an' git inter this fix so soon after leavin' the train."

"After leaving the train? What do you mean by that?"

"Mean just what I say. You pulled th' bell-cord, after th' train had passed th' station, an' as soon as th' train stopped, you lit out across th' field. I seen you."

"Boy, you are crazy."

"I ain't as crazy as I look."

"Well, I cannot see how you look, but there is a mistake somewhere. I have not been aboard any train in several days."

"Then there must be a mistake, sure enough, an' a full-grown one, too. Do you mean ter say you wasn't on the Night Express to-night?"

"I was not."

"An' yet ye say yer name is M. Henry Paul?"

"It is."

"Well, then there must be two of th' same name, fer M. Henry Paul was on the Express, sure pop. Leastwise that was what he called himself."

"Boy, you interest me. Tell me all you know about this matter."

"I will if I kin keep my teeth from rattlin' long enough. Lordy! but ain't this water cold! Ain't you cold?"

"It certainly is cold, and we must do our best to get out of it. Together we may be able to do

something. But tell me what you can about my double."

"Well, it ain't a great deal, an' it's soon told. Ye see I was in the mail-room with the agent, takin' a ride with him down to Clifton an' back, as I sometimes do, when there came a knock at the door. The agent opened it an' a man slipped in. He said as how bein' th' train didn't make no stop at Springside, an' he expectin' a letter that was mighty portant to him, he wanted Prenty—th' agent, ye know—ter give it to him."

"And did he?" the man asked.

"Nixey. Th' man said it was a big letter, addressed to M. Henry Paul, an' bein' as he was th' man, he wanted it. Prenty don't do biz that way, though, an' he told him so; an' even when th' man offered a hundred—"

"He offered a hundred dollars for it?"

"Exactly; but Prenty said 'no' jest th' same, an' put him out."

"Good!"

"An' that letter must be in one of these bags."

"Sure enough. We must manage some way to keep them out of the water so their contents will not get wet. How can we do it?"

"Give it up, unless ye kin git hold of a little stick, or a nail, an' kin stick it in atween th' bricks an' hang 'em on it."

"Just the thing. I have a pencil here which will answer the purpose nicely."

"Say, though," Mart reflected, "if we're goin' ter try to get out o' here we don't want to leave th' mail-bags behind us, do we?"

"Not if we can take them with us, my lad."

"Just so; an' such bein' th' case, s'pose we roll 'em up an' tie 'em onto our shoulders like sojor's knapsacks. They ain't very full, I don't reckon."

"A good idea, and that is what we will do."

A few minutes' work and the task was done.

Having plenty of cord, the bags were easily secured to the shoulders of the man and boy, each of whom assisted the other.

The man cared little for the mail as a whole, but there was one letter in which he had great interest, and not knowing which bag it was in, he was obliged to make an effort to save them both.

With Mail-boy Mart it was different. He was a sworn carrier, and he meant to see that the mail did not get lost or damaged if he could prevent.

While they were thus engaged their conversation did not flag.

"And you say that man stopped the train and got off, after the train had passed the station, and ran away across the fields, eh?" the man interrogated.

"Yes, sir."

"And would you know him if you were to see him again?"

"Sure."

"Very well, if we ever get out of here so that we can see each other, you will know it was not I."

"But," said Mart, "how did you git in here? Was you throwed in same as I was?"

"Yes; but very luckily for us both, I was not bound."

"And who done it?"

"Two villains, who, as I believe, were hired to murder me."

"Did ye see their faces so's ye kin know 'em ag'in?"

"No, unfortunately."

"Learn their names?"

"One was called 'Hank.'"

"Them's th' same two that pitched me in."

"And where did they get hold of you, my lad, and why did they want to put you out of the way?"

"I was spyan' on 'em, an' they nabbed me."

"You were spying on them?"

"Yes."

"You speak in riddles. Where did you find them, and what were you after them for?"

"Ye see I left th' train when it was stopped by that feller, an' set out ter find out who killed Old Roger. I—"

"Is Old Roger, the carrier, dead?"

"Deader'n a stump. These same two fellers hung him up on th' arm of th' mail-stand, an' when th' Night Express came along Prentiss caught th' body with th' crane."

"Heavens! that was horrible! Give me the particulars. If I ever get out of this hole, and my life is spared, that honest old man shall be avenged."

Mart complied, and gave his new-found friend all the main particulars of his night's adventures.

And he had an attentive listener.

"It is all the work of that fiend in human form—James Hammond," the man grated. "But he shall pay the penalty for his crimes. I will tear the mask from his face and show him up in his true light. But, lad, how to get out of here?"

CHAPTER VIII.

LOVE IS NOT BLIND.

THE most charming lady in Springside was Miss Doxie Howell.

She was charming alike in appearance, manner, and disposition, and it was said of her that she lived more for others than for herself. Good, kind, charitable, possessing all the qualities that go to make up the perfect Christian woman, she was loved by all who knew her.

Miss Howell was no longer young, as ladies reckon their years, for she was nearly thirty-two, but in appearance and spirits she was fully ten years younger.

The passing years had dealt kindly with her, and she was still the recognized belle of every social gathering in the neighborhood.

She had had many offers of marriage, but had refused them all, preferring, as she said, a life of independent freedom.

But there was another and a deeper reason why she had never married.

Back of her easy-going, every-day life was a little romance. And that romance has as much to do with our story as has Miss Howell herself, almost.

Doxie had had a school-day lover in the person of young St. Edmund Dare.

And, unlike most such affairs of the the heart, this one grew stronger instead of proving but a passing fancy.

When St. Edmund left home, at the age of fifteen, he and Doxie exchanged vows that, upon his return, they would become lovers in fact.

And both were thoroughly in earnest.

Doxie was the daughter of a quite wealthy farmer, who was one of Squire Dare's best friends. The two families were quite intimate.

When Doxie was about sixteen years old her mother died, and her father, at her request, sent her away to a young ladies' school where she remained until she was twenty.

Then she returned home, and had ever since managed her father's house for him.

She and St. Edmund corresponded with more or less regularity, up to the time when his letters to his parents suddenly ceased.

Even after that she continued true to her pledge, and never gave up hope. She tried, too, to inspire her lover's parents with her own confidence, but in vain.

Time passed, and at last St. Edmund returned.

And his return caused no little excitement in the quiet country town and its immediate neighborhood.

Everybody was anxious to see the wanderer, and hear from his own lips the story of his adventures. And, as may be imagined, no one was more anxious to meet him than Doxie Howell.

Strange to say, though, St. Edmund did not call.

Her first meeting with him was at church on Sunday.

He did not greet her, though he spoke to her father and grasped his hand warmly.

Doxie was right beside her father at the time, and her father said:

"My daughter, Doxie, Mr. Dare; do you not remember her?"

"What! this Doxie?" St. Edmund exclaimed.

"I would never have known her."

This cut like a knife into the faithful girl's heart, and she turned away quickly to conceal the pain her face expressed.

After that, St. Edmund called at the Howell homestead frequently.

Doxie's charms were not lost upon him, it seemed, and he fell desperately in love with her.

But he might as well have loved an iceberg.

After his slighting her as he had done, she treated him with a mere polite recognition that was simply freezing.

Strange to say, the more distant she became the more persistent were his attentions. But they were in vain.

One evening, af er St. Edmund had left their house, Doxie startled her father with this assertion:

"Father, that man is not St. Edmund Dare."

"Not St. Edmund?" Mr. Howell exclaimed.

"No, father, he is not."

"But, Doxie, he has proven his identity to

the satisfaction of everybody, and the estate has been turned over to him."

"I know he has, father, but I believe him to be an impostor."

"Why do you believe that?"

"Because, for one thing, he is so unlike the St. Edmund we used to know."

"I admit it; but you must not lose sight of the fact that he was away from home full fifteen years, and that he grew from boyhood to manhood in foreign lands."

"I have made allowance for all that, but still I cannot believe that this man is the true heir."

"Have you any other reasons for your belief?"

"I have."

"What are they?"

"You know that I corresponded with St. Edmund after he went away."

"Yes, I know."

"And you know that he asked me to become his wife."

"Yes, you told me."

"Then it will be easier for me to explain. St. Edmund and I were school-day lovers, and when he went away we agreed to write to each other and to keep up our warm friendship. I was thoroughly in earnest, and so was he. I waited for him to return. When I was about twenty (he was then twenty-three), he wrote and asked me to wait for his return and then to become his wife."

"Yes, my child."

"Well, you know how he greeted me when he did return."

"True, true."

"He acted just as though he had never seen me before."

"He certainly did; but he has since evidently tried to make amends for it, and he now wants you to marry him."

"And I never will. He has asked me to marry him, but no mention has he ever made of our correspondence and engagement. Why does he not remind me of that? No, he is not St. Edmund, but an impostor. He knows nothing of the fact that I corresponded with St. Edmund, or of my promise to him."

Mr. Howell was thoughtful.

Here was something which, to say the very least, was strange.

"And what are we to do?" he asked.

"We will do nothing," was Doxie's firm reply. "I would not have my name mixed up in the gossip it would create. Besides we have no proof."

"You are right. I have often thought as you do, but have set it all to his being so long away from home. Now I am more than ever inclined to doubt him. But, we must not mention our suspicions."

Still St. Edmund forced his presence upon them, and more than once pressed his suit for her hand.

At last, in the presence of Mr. Howell, he demanded a reason for Doxie's persistent refusal.

Doxie tried to put him off with some evasive answer, but he would not be put off. He demanded a reason, and appealed to Mr. Howell.

"My father and you were friends," he said, "and I hoped to lead your daughter to Dare Manor as my wife. It is unjust to turn me away with no explanation. You leave it all to your daughter, and she persistently answers 'no.'"

"And," Mr. Howell returned, "it is for her to give you her reasons, or not, as she will."

"And it is my right, I must insist, to demand some reason for the refusal," St. Edmund rejoined.

"It will make no difference, so far as my determination is concerned," said Doxie, "and I would rather not give a reason."

St. Edmund would not be satisfied, however, and at last Doxie said:

"Well, one reason is, I do not love you, and it would be folly for me to marry you unless I did."

"Nonsense!" was the reply; "you would learn to love me, for I would devote my whole time to you in striving to make you happy. But, you say that is one reason; are there others?"

"There is one other, at least."

"And that is—what?"

Something that had gone before had fired Doxie's spirit a little, and she replied in a calm, cool tone, while she fixed her eyes steadily upon the man before her:

"That is, because I do not believe that you are St. Edmund Dare."

For an instant the man's face was ashy pale.

He soon recovered, though, and exclaimed:

"What do you mean what you say?"

And Doxie answered:

"I do."

She was now more firmly convinced than ever. In declaring that she did not love him she was giving the lie to her own written confession. She did love Edmund, and had told him so more than once in her letters. Why did he not speak of that now?

It was because, Doxie reasoned, he is not St. Edmund, and knows nothing about our past.

The man turned at once to Mr. Howell.

"And do you entertain the same idea?" he demanded.

"I must own," the honest old man replied, "that I see a reasonable doubt. But I can say nothing further."

"And what causes that doubt? I demand to know."

"I will tell you, sir. There was an understanding between my daughter and St. Edmund Dare, concerning which, you have made it plain to us, you know nothing."

The man grew angry.

"I will endeavor to convince you both of your error," he said warmly, and left the house.

Some days later a great many of the best people of the neighborhood were invited to Dare Manor, Mr. Howell and Doxie included.

The latter did not attend.

After dinner, while the male guests were partaking of their wine, St. Edmund said:

"Gentlemen, I have recently heard a doubt expressed that I am the true heir to this estate. In other words, it has been said that I am not St. Edmund Dare. I want to show further and final proof that I am, so that all such silly talk may be checked. When I was a lad among you an old sailor one day printed a curious device in India-ink upon my arm. No doubt many among you remember to have seen it."

Several said they had, and St. Edmund bared his arm and displayed the mark.

It was declared to be the same.

Speaking a few words to a servant, St. Edmund motioned him to open a certain door, and the old sailor was conducted into the room.

He was asked whether the device upon the arm was his handiwork, and answered promptly that it was.

St. Edmund's position was secured.

He would not name the doubters, but let the matter rest right there. And he never again darkened Mr. Howell's door. Nor did any person ever hear a doubt expressed after that, and it was a "nine days' wonder," to use the popular phrase, to the neighborhood who the doubters could have been.

So matters stood at the time of our story.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORY OF THE CRIME.

AND now for a word concerning M. Henry Paul, who, with Mail-boy Mart, was in the bottom of the old well near the Springside station, and then to relate how the prisoners made their escape from their novel place of confinement.

Mr. Paul had come to Springside early in the season, and had been a guest at the Eagle Hotel all summer.

He was evidently a man of means, and soon made the acquaintance of nearly all the citizens and gained their friendship.

In general appearance he was not unlike St. Edmund Dare. He was, however, a handsome man, and his natural manners were more pleasing. He was the same at all times, whereas St. Edmund had his moods.

About the only person in Springside with whom Mr. Paul was not on friendly terms was St. Edmund. Not that they were enemies, for no one could say that. They seemed simply to have never made each other's acquaintance, and neither appeared desirous to do so. Nor did they avoid each other. They were as strangers.

What Mr. Paul's business was no one knew. Perhaps he had none. He had plenty of money, spent it freely but not lavishly, and evidently had sufficient means.

Another mystery was, why he remained so long in the sleepy old town of Springside. Surely there were no attractions there for a man who had traveled as extensively as he clearly had, unless the attractions he sought were peace and quiet. These were there, certainly.

But Dame Rumor soon found another reason—another attraction. This one was Doxie Howell. Mr. Paul had made her acquaintance shortly after his coming there, and their friendship had rapidly followed. He was a frequent caller at the Howell homestead.

Here, too, was another explanation for the

apparent coldness between him and St. Edmund Dare. It was known that St. Edmund had visited Doxie quite often for some time after his return from abroad, and that now he was never seen there.

It was clear to Dame Rumor that Mr. Paul was the favored one, and certainly no one could quarrel with Doxie for her choice. What puzzled the good dame, though, was to learn just how matters stood. Were Mr. Paul and Doxie anything more than friends? No one could say.

It remains for us, who are more privileged, to lift the curtain and bring the secret to light.

Mr. Henry Paul had asked Doxie to become his wife.

She had refused.

He was no more fortunate than St. Edmund Dare had been, in this respect.

But Doxie's reason in the second instance was not the same. She was perfectly frank with Mr. Paul, and told him that her hand was promised to another to whom she intended to remain true—even to the grave, if necessary.

Of course her lover pressed for the story in full, but it was denied him. Doxie remained silent upon the important point, and kept her secret well.

If her absent lover ever returned, she declared, he would find her true to her promise. If he did not— Well, she would wait on.

"But," Mr. Paul reasoned, "suppose your absent lover returns with a bride. He may have forgotten you long ere this, and may be already married."

Doxie's cheeks grew pale, and tears came to her eyes.

"Heaven help me, then," she said. "But," she quickly added, "that will not happen. I know—" she came near speaking the name—"I know him too well. He is dead, or he will return."

It will be seen that Mr. Paul had gained her confidence in a marked degree, and but for that other tie, no doubt Doxie would have yielded her heart to him.

But she remained true, and although Mr. Paul could not win her love, he retained her friendship.

Mr. Henry Paul, during his stay at Springside, was in constant communication with the lawyers, Higgins & Bondwell of New York, of whom casual mention has been made.

And, too, he had taken an occasional run to the city to visit their office in person.

What his business was need not be mentioned now.

On this day, upon which the interest of our story centers, M. Henry Paul had called at the post-office.

He did not go there frequently, as most of his letters were carried to and from by one of the hotel servants.

What his business was we have learned from the postmaster, Mr. Larkspur.

It may not be out of place to go over it in a few words.

It was in the forenoon when he called, and to Mr. Larkspur he said:

"I expect a rather bulky letter to-day, or within a day or two at most. When it comes, please hold it here, and I will call for it. Do not send it to the hotel."

Larkspur said he would do as requested, and Mr. Paul added:

"It will be from Higgins & Bondwell, New York, so you can't mistake it."

This shows that the expected letter was of more than ordinary importance or value.

It was, indeed.

Later in the day, much to Mr. Paul's surprise, he received a telegram from the lawyers, as follows, in cipher:

"M. HENRY PAUL, SPRINGSIDE:—

"We think after send letter by special on Night Express. Train will stop. Be at station—meet our man.

HIGGINS & BONDWELL."

It was greatly abbreviated, as most telegrams are, but the meaning was plain.

The expected letter was to be sent by a man direct from the office instead of by mail, as had been the previous understanding. The train would stop, and Mr. Paul was requested to meet the man at the station.

"I cannot understand," Mr. Paul reflected, "why they should change their plans. They wrote only yesterday saying when and how the papers would be sent. They must have some reason, though, for the change, and as they have telegraphed me, I will be on hand at the station when the Night Express arrives. It is something new for that train to stop at Springside, too, but perhaps there has been a change made."

Night came, and allowing himself plenty of

time to reach the station at an easy walk, Mr. Paul started to meet the train.

He had mentioned his business to no one, and started out alone.

And he was only a short time ahead of Old Roger, the mail-carrier, who went down to deliver a mail-bag to, and to receive one from, the same train.

In fact, before he had quite reached the station Mr. Paul heard the old carrier behind him, and the peculiar clicking of the lock and hasp of the mail-bag told him who it was.

When he had almost reached his destination, Mr. Paul was greatly startled to have two men spring up suddenly in his path and attack him.

And so sudden was the attack that he could not defend himself, desperately as he tried to do so.

"At him, Hank!" he heard one of his assailants hiss, and both threw themselves upon him.

The struggle was of short duration.

Mr. Paul grappled with one of the men, and undoubtedly could have overcome him without great effort, but the other was armed with a "billy," a blow from which, well directed, gave the ruffians an easy victory.

But the end was not yet.

Mr. Paul fell senseless to the ground, but at the same moment another actor appeared upon the scene.

This was Roger Blake, the mail-carrier.

Old Roger always carried a stout cudgel when he had the mail-bag with him, and with this he rushed forward to attack the two rascals.

Hearing the scuffling, the muttered oaths, and the blows, he had hurried up, and was just in time to witness the ending blow.

"Curse ye for th' cowards ye be!" he cried, "but ye shall answer for this."

"Look out, Bob!" one of the rascals exclaimed, as he sprung from under a heavy blow of the cudgel, "here's one more ter do fer."

"At him!" hissed Hank, as he succeeded in dodging the next blow, and both sprung at the old carrier at once.

The old man fought desperately, and for some seconds it looked as though he would win.

But fate was against him. Another well-directed blow from the "billy" gave the murderers the victory.

That blow caused the old man's death.

No time was to be lost now, as the cowardly ruffians well knew. If they would conceal their victims they must do so without delay. No knowing how soon others would appear upon the scene, and in another encounter they might get the worst of it.

"What now, Hank?" Bob inquired.

"To th' old well," was the whispered answer, "and quick about it, too."

"Which first?"

"Th' gent," was the reply, and as he spoke the leading rascal laid hold upon Mr. Paul's shoulders and partly lifted him.

The other grasped his feet, and they at once carried the unconscious man into the adjacent field.

"Is he dead?" queried Bob.

"If he ain't now he soon will be," was Hank's grim answer.

"But hadn't we better be sure?" the other insisted.

"It will be a sure thing as soon as we dump him inter th' hole, an' here we be."

Evidently they had visited the old well previous to their attack upon their victim, for they had now gone straight to it and the boards were already removed.

Without any hesitation they carried the man forward to the dismal hole, held him for one second, and then down they let him drop.

Mr. Paul was just on the point of regaining consciousness, and in a few moments more might have offered further resistance that would have cost him his life.

As it was, he fortunately fell into a sitting attitude, and when he plunged into the cold water his senses returned quickly.

He was unhurt, beyond a severe shock, and soon partly realized what had taken place.

This part of their hellish work performed, the murderers were about to return for the old carrier, to serve him in like manner, when one of them paused and suggested the heinous plan of hanging him up on the mail-stand.

This was agreed to.

Covering up the well they went back to the road, lifted up the body of the old carrier, taking the mail-bag, too, and carried it to the mail-stand.

There, after a moment's careful listening to assure themselves that no one was approaching, they tied the hands of the corpse behind its back,

put a rope around its neck, and, as soon as they had discovered how, hung it in this manner upon the mail-stand arm.

CHAPTER X.

NECESSITY THE MOTHER OF INVENTION.

HAVING now, to a great extent, brought the past up to the present in our romance, let us hasten back to the old well.

"But, lad, how to get out of here?" was what M. Henry Paul said to Mail-boy Mart, when they had secured the damp mail-bags upon each other's shoulders.

And that was the puzzling question.

It was next to an impossibility for them to do so, if not quite one.

The well was about twenty feet deep, at a guess, and its circular wall was perfectly smooth and moss-grown.

They had nothing that could be of any assistance to them.

Only a few short pieces of rotten wood were to be found, and they were of no use whatever.

Feeling with their feet around the bottom, they found a short piece of chain, but that could not be made use of in any way that they could think of.

No, like rats in a trap, it seemed as though they were helplessly imprisoned.

"Well," commented Mail-boy Mart, "it is a good deal ter be thankful for that we're alive, but life in such a hole as this is only an aggravation. I dunno but I'll jist say ter myself, 'Here goes nobody,' sink under water, an' give up th' ghost."

Mr. Paul laughed.

"We are certainly in a terrible fix," he agreed, "but we must not give up. I have seen every part of the known world, my lad, and have more than once been in a tight place, but I have always come out all right. This old well may prove our grave, but I shall fight for life to the last moment."

"Well, if you mean ter stick it out as long as ye kin, I spose I might as well do th' same. It ain't ter be supposed, though, that I kin stand it as long as you kin."

"It is live or die together, my lad," was the answer, "so brace up and steel your nerves. I shall hold you out of water as long as I can stand."

"Which won't be long, I'm afraid."

"Perhaps not; but let me think."

"All right, think all ye want ter. I'm mum. If ye kin think o' some way out o' this fix ye'll do more'n I kin, an' I shal be heartily obliged ter ye; good gracious, yes!"

For a long time both were silent.

Every moment was an age to Mail-boy Mart, and he was chilled to the bone.

He felt that ere long he would have to give up and lean upon his stronger companion.

At last Mr. Paul exclaimed:

"I have it!"

"I hope ter goodness ye have," declared Mart, "fer I'm about dead."

"Yes," continued his fellow prisoner, "I have an idea which is worth the trying, but it all depends on you."

"On me!" the boy exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes," was the assurance, "upon you."

"An' what be I to do?" Mart inquired.

"Can you climb, do you think?"

"Climb!"

"Yes."

"Climb what?"

"A rope."

"Good gracious! if there's a rope here why didn't you mention it long ago?"

"There isn't any here, my lad, but if you think you have enough strength to climb to the top of this well, I will make one. It is barely possible that I can do the work myself, but I fear not. You are much lighter."

"Lord love ye, Mr. Paul," said Mart, in earnest tones, "if you'll show me th' rope to climb, I'll climb it or die tryin'."

"Brave boy!"

"But, where is th' rope ter come from?" Mart doubtfully questioned.

"I see you doubt me," said Mr. Paul, "but I have thought the plan out carefully. In the first place, we must cut open one of these mail-bags—both, in fact, and empty the contents of one bag into the other."

"I see! I see!" exclaimed the boy; "an' then cut th' empty bag inter strips an' make a rope o' em! But, it won't work. It might do if we wanted ter climb down, but we don't; we want ter climb up."

"Just so, my boy, and that is the hardest part of it."

"So I should think. But, let's hear th' rest of yer plan."

"Well, having cut one bag into strips and made our rope, so much will be done. Then will come the climbing. Now on each of these bags is a strap with a strong steel hasp on one end. These straps we will cut off, and I will secure them to your arms. You will feel for a crevice between the bricks, stick one hasp into it as far as you can, and then pull yourself up a little way. Then you must reach up with the other arm, find another crevice, and stick in the other hasp. And so on to the top. You will carry the rope with you, and once at the top you must secure one end of it so that it will bear my weight, and then my escape, too, will be assured. *Can you do it?*"

Mail-boy Mart was astounded. Here was a plan, certainly a simple one—if it could be carried out, and he would never have thought of it.

Verily, "Necessity is the mother of Invention," and happy is he whose "bump" of invention is well developed.

"If I was in good trim," said Mart, "I think I could do it easy; but as it is, I'm ready ter drop now. I'll try it, though, all th' same, an' do my best."

"No man can do more. You see, the hasps would not, I fear, bear my weight, so our hope rests on you."

"I'll do it," declared Mart, firmly, "or I'll die. Get ready th' rope."

"Nobly said!" exclaimed Paul, in earnest tones. "Carry the rope to the top and fix it there so I can get out, or else go for help, in case the rope fails us, and you shall never need to work another hour as long as you live."

The first step was to take the mail-bags from their shoulders. This was soon done, and then Mr. Paul cut a slit in each, near the top.

This done, Mart held one bag up while his companion carefully transferred the letters, papers, etc., into it from the other.

One bag was soon empty, as neither had contained a great amount.

When this was done, Mr. Paul cut the entire top from the one containing the mail. Then he cut a large round hole in the bag, through both sides, put his head through it, and swung the bag around upon his back, thus making the neatest kind of a pouch and one that was convenient to carry.

"It is a serious offense to open the mail," he remarked as he worked, "but stern necessity compels. We will take good care of the matter, though," he added; "it is only the pouch we are in need of."

When the mail had been cared for, as shown, the top of the other bag was cut off in the same manner.

Working in the dark, as they were, the proposed task was by no means an easy one to accomplish.

Suddenly Mr. Paul paused in his work and gave an exclamation of almost despair.

"It is useless!" he cried.

"Don't fer goodness' sake say that!" came instantly from Mart. "What is wrong?"

"How are we to get the locks off, so that we can get the hasps free? I did not think of this before."

Mart uttered a groan. Was their plan, after all, to prove useless? At first blush it seemed so, for without the two steel hasps they could do nothing, and they certainly could not remove the locks from the staples.

What was to be done?

"I'll tell ye," said Mart, after a moment's thought, "mebby ye kin cut th' staples out an' then git th' hasps off from th' other end regardless o' th' lock."

"Just what I was thinking about. I will try it, and do the best I can. We must get them off somehow."

Mr. Paul was, most fortunately, provided with a good knife, and he set to work immediately.

First he cut loose the strap from the end furthest from the hasp, and drew it out of the eyelets. Then he attacked the staple. To cut it out was but a few moments' work, but to free the hasp from it was something more.

Mart held the other things while he was at work.

"If I could only see," the worker complained, "I could make better headway, but I suppose I must do the best I can. I have the leather all off the ends now, but the big rivet-stops will not allow the hasp to come off. It is most disheartening."

"Can't ye break th' staple by pullin' it open an' shut?" Mart suggested.

"Happy thought! I can try it, at least."

And try it he did.

He could not, at first, even bend the stout

iron, being unable to get sufficient hold upon the short ends. When he ran the strap through, however, and pulled both ways with that, he opened the stubborn staple readily enough. Then, by closing it and opening it repeatedly, he worked patiently to break it in two.

And finally he succeeded. It gradually became easier and easier to bend, and at last it broke and the hasp was free.

"Victory!" Paul exclaimed, in a glad tone. "And now for the other."

The same amount of work had to be expended again, but the success was assured and it seemed easier to do.

Both hasps and straps were now free.

"Here, my lad, hold them," said Mr. Paul, "and I will hasten to make the rope."

Mart took them, and at once began to fumble around the circular wall of their prison.

"What are you doing?" asked Paul, as he heard him.

"I thought I'd try 'em," responded the boy.

"Well, let me secure them to your arms, then. It will serve to keep your blood warm, the exercise, and you may be able to make some progress."

Securely fastening the straps to the boy's arms, so that they could not be left in the wall above reach in case he should slip, he let him try them while he prepared the rope.

Mr. Paul had already tested the strength of the hasps, and felt sure that they would not bear his weight.

While Mart was busy, he hastened with his task.

Cutting the bag into long strips, a slow and tiresome piece of work, he next joined the ends of the strips to form the rope.

Meanwhile, Mail-boy Mart had succeeded in climbing up six feet or more, and was hanging by his arms to rest, the hasps firmly secured.

"I'm so far, anyhow," he panted.

"Do you think you can climb to the top, my brave boy?" Paul asked.

"Well, I reckon I'll have ter, after I git out o' your reach," was the reply, "for I won't be able to pull both hasps out at th' same time."

"True enough, and I almost fear to let you try it."

"Well, somethin' has got ter be did, that's flat; an' you kin bet I won't back out o' doin' my share. You've invented th' means, an' now it is fer me ter do th' rest. Boost me up now, an' help me down so's I kin rest a little, an' then as soon as that rope is ready, I'll git down ter biz!"

Mr. Paul did so, and Mart soon found himself seated upon his strong shoulders.

"I will not let you down into the water again," he said, "for you are now warm and that would chill you worse than ever. You sit there and rest while I make the rope."

CHAPTER XI.

HOW THE PLAN WORKED.

MAIL-BOY MART had never felt so grateful to a stranger before, and, with tears springing to his eyes, he resolved to do his best to reach the top of the old well and thus prove that he was made of the right metal.

In no other way could Mr. Paul hope to escape, for a few hours in that cold water must prove fatal.

"I will rescue him," Mart repeated over and over again, mentally, "or I will die a-tryin'."

And the boy meant it.

Never before had he felt so thankful for a chance to sit down, and his strength returned rapidly.

He was sitting astride the man's neck, with his legs hanging in front, and he could feel the man's arms busy at work.

"Mr. Paul," he presently said, "I must be too heavy. You can't work. Let me down."

"No, no," was the short reply, "only sit still and be still. I can't talk now."

"But you'll tire out, an'—"

"No, no, not a word. Take a good rest, for your work is to come."

Mart realized this full well, so he took the man's advice, and leaning back against the wall, folded his arms.

The man's strong arms worked constantly, and not for a single moment did Mart feel him stop.

The putting together of the pieces would have been an easy task under favorable conditions, but in this case it was anything else. All that needed to be done was to cut a slit in each end of each piece and then put each through the other and pull the joint tight—almost every boy who ever broke a skate-strap knows how it

is done—but there were many pieces, and all things considered it required a long time and much patience.

But at last it was done, and, with a long sigh of relief, Mr. Paul straightened up.

"Done at last," he said.

"Good!" cried Mart, "an' I am well rested. I am ready for another climb."

"Well, you shall have it, and I hope it may prove a successful one. For my part, I am well tired."

"An' no wonder," said Mart, "holdin' me an' workin', too."

Mart had failed to catch the inner meaning of the remark.

"Now, my lad, pay attention," said Paul. "I have been thinking as well as working, and I have found the means for you to descend for another rest, in case you tire out, or in case you find a place where you cannot search out a chink into which to get a hold with the hasps."

"You have?" questioned Mart; "then you are a boss at inventin'." But, go on."

"I will loop this rope over one of your arms. In case you have to come down, all you will have to do will be to slip the rope from your arm to the hasp, taking care to make it secure, and descend by it. Do you understand?"

"I reckon I do, but I hope I won't have to use it. Fasten it on, now, an' I'll start."

Mr. Paul slipped the rope over the boy's arm, then, and the boy grasped his "climbers" firmly and felt for the crevices into which he had put them before. He soon found them, and pulled himself up.

His fellow prisoner helped him up to the next reaches, by pushing his feet, and then Mart was left to work alone.

"Now for it, iad," Mr. Paul said, "and God assist you."

"I mean ter make th' top," Mart declared, "if my arms hold to my body."

And up he started.

It was comparatively easy for a few minutes, while he was fresh for the work, but his arms soon began to tire and his breathing to grow labored.

Fortunately he found places easily into which to secure new holds, and he took care not to remove his supporting climber until the other was firmly fixed.

It was not long when he had to put both irons into the same chink and hang down at arm's length to rest—if resting it could be called.

After a few moments' pause he started on, but had only gained a few inches when he had to stop again.

With a feeling of horror he realized that it was a task beyond his strength.

Suddenly a new thought came to him, and in faint tones he called out:

"Mr. Paul, I'm comin' down."

"Heavens! do you have to give up?" the man exclaimed d'spairingly.

"No," returned Mart, "but I can't do it this way. I've got a new idea."

"Well, come down, but be sure you make the rope secure."

This the boy was already doing. He had fixed his climbers firmly, and soon had the rope secured to them. He now slipped the knots and removed the straps from his arms, and began to descend.

Mr. Paul was ready to catch him as before.

"Well, my lad," he remarked, "what is the trouble?"

"Th' trouble is my arms," Mart replied. "I climbed till I couldn't climb another inch, and I had ter stop. I couldn't raise myself again to save me, an' th' ropes got so tight around my arms that I hadn't no feelin' in 'em."

"Then we are doomed," said Mr. Paul, in a tone of despair, "unless we can hold out as we are until daylight, and then by shouting can make some one hear us."

"Which ain't likely," said Mart, "fer this old well seemed ter me ter be in an awful lonesome place. Besides, I know I couldn't stand it till daylight. But we won't say 'die' yet; good-gracious, no! I've got another little plan in my noodle."

"And what is it?"

"It is jest this: I want you to take a piece off o' th' end o' this rope an' put a big loop in it fer my feet, at one end, an' a little loop at th' other end, fer th' hasp. Then I kin rest my arms as often as I like, an' I bet I'll get there next time, sure pop!"

"My boy, you have hit upon a good plan," said Mr. Paul, joyfully. "Sit still on my shoulders and I will prepare the patent resting rope. Now escape seems certain, and all thanks to you. Only get me out of here, and I shall not forget my promise."

In a short time the contrivance was ready, and once more Mail-boy Mart undertook his task.

He was quite rested again, and climbed up the rope, hand over hand, to the point where it was secured, quite easily.

That point reached, he put his "patent resting-rope" to use at once, and it proved an excellent thing.

Now he could use his hands and arms more freely.

How carefully he had to work can be imagined. The slightest false move would precipitate him to the bottom again, and then, even though fortunate enough not to get hurt, all chance of escape would be lost.

Taking a good rest, he arranged the straps upon his arms again with care, and then, with a cheering word to Mr. Paul, pulled out one of the climbers and felt for a new hold.

Thanks to the foot-rest, too, he could now reach much higher than before.

But, having shown the ingenious plan of escape from a trap where escape seemed an utter impossibility, it is not necessary to follow the brave boy step by step to the top, which he finally reached, after a long and trying struggle.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, then, "I'm at th' top at last!"

"Thank God!" came from below.

"Any rope left down there?" Mart asked.

"Plenty of it," was the reply. "Take a rest, now, my brave lad, and then see if you can get out. And above all things use care."

"You bet I'll be careful. I don't want to get down inter that hole again if I kin help it."

The boy rested for a few minutes, and then prepared to get out.

When he came to try to remove the boards, however, he found that he could not lift them.

He had to use one hand, the other hand and his feet being needed to sustain him upon his ticklish perch.

Here was an unforeseen obstacle.

"Mr. Paul," he called down, "here is another difficulty. I can't push away th' heavy boards."

"You can't?"

"No."

"That is bad? What is to be done now?"

"Bless me if I know. I'll give it one more trial, anyhow."

The result was the same. Placed at such a disadvantage, the boards were too much for the boy's strength.

"I can't do it," he declared, "can't even budge 'em."

"I'll tell you, my lad," called up Mr. Paul, "see if you can fasten the rope securely around one of the boards. If so, I can climb up."

"Bully! Didn't think o' that. Hold on jest two seconds, an' I'll see what kin be did."

Taking a firm hold, Mart leaned out and felt all around overhead.

Soon he found a place where he could put his hand up between the boards on each side of a strong and narrow one."

This, he thought, was just what he wanted, and taking the rope, holding it in his teeth at some distance from the end, so that he could not drop it, he tried to pass the end up and over the board.

It was some minutes before he succeeded, but he did succeed at last, and then he carefully made it secure.

"Now, Mr. Paul," he directed, "try it."

"You're sure it's fast?" his fellow-prisoner questioned.

"Sure pop. If th' board holds th' rope will, you bet."

"Well, look out for yourself now, in case the board comes down."

"All right, let 'er go."

Mart heard the board creak, then, as Mr. Paul put his weight upon it.

After two or three good trials of its strength, Mr. Paul said:

"That seems all solid, my boy, and up I come."

In a few moments he was at the top.

"Now," he said, "let us both push together, and we'll see if something won't give way."

Thus they did, and one of the widest and heaviest boards was lifted and thrown back.

"Good!" cried Mart.

"Good, indeed!" echoed Mr. Paul, adding,

"Now, out with you, lad, and then I will follow."

Mart obeyed, the man assisting him, and then the man climbed out.

"Thank God we are free," the latter said, fervently. "What seemed impossible at first has been accomplished, thanks to him who gave us our faculties."

Mr. Paul quickly drew up the rope then, and removed it from the board, and removed also the climbers Mart had used. Then he replaced the boards, and taking Mart by the hand, both hurried away from the scene.

Barely ten minutes had they been gone, when a woman came to the old well. She was clad in a dark dress, and had a shawl over head and shoulders. With eager haste she lifted one of the lighter boards from its place, and, stooping down, called:

"Is any one down there?"
The woman was—Doxie Howell.

CHAPTER XII.

DOXIE HOWELL'S DREAM.

DOXIE HOWELL had retired that night at her usual hour, but for some time was unable to fall asleep.

Her thoughts were far away.

Finally she got up again, lighted her lamp, and sat down to read until she should feel sleepy.

She read, or tried to read, for a few minutes, and then gave it up and threw aside the book.

"How strange it is," she muttered, as she rose and began to pace the floor, "that I can think of nothing but him."

Presently she turned to the mantle, and stood and gazed fixedly at the photograph of a handsome, noble-faced boy for a long time.

At last she turned away with a sigh, with tears in her eyes, and, taking up her lamp, put it down upon the floor beside her trunk.

Then she sat down and threw the lid of the trunk open.

In one end was a small box, and from this she took a bundle of letters, all tied up with the greatest care.

Untying them, she opened and began to read them, one by one.

They were letters from every land, and bore post-marks the most curious and rare.

Silently she read on and on, sometimes a smile playing for a moment over her face, but oftener with tears dropping from her eyes.

On and still on she read, until at last her eyes grew heavy and her head began to droop, and at last she leaned back against the wall and slept.

When she awoke, an hour later it was with a cry and a start.

Springing up, she pressed her hands to her head, looked around confusedly, and questioned:

"Have I been asleep? and was it all a dream? No, no, it was all too real. It was more than a dream. I saw him plainly, just as I used to know him—just as he looks there," glancing at the photograph on the mantle, "and I know it was more than a dream. I saw him thrown into that old well in the field near the station, and then I saw him at the bottom, with his arms stretched out toward me. What can it mean?"

She passed to and fro several times, and then stopped short.

"I will go there," she decided. "I will call father—No, I must go alone. He would think it all nonsense, and might forbid my going. I will take Rover and go at once."

Hurriedly she donned her clothes, and taking up her lamp and turning it low, opened her door and glided silently from her room and down the stairs.

Making her way to the kitchen, she there provided herself with a lantern, which she did not then light, and a rope, and then throwing a shawl over her head and shoulders, went out and locked the door after her.

There was instantly a deep growl from a big dog, but a word from her silenced the animal, and going to its house she unfastened its chain and bade it follow her.

Perhaps the dog understood from the manner of its mistress that she wanted it to be silent, for while it leaped gladly around her it did not utter a sound, and her whispered "Silence, Rover!" seemed to be entirely unnecessary.

The Howell Farm, by the way, was on the south side of the railroad, and fully a mile from the town. Hence it was about half a mile from the station.

Doxie knew every inch of the country for miles around.

Going at once down the lane to the main road she turned toward the station without hesitancy or fear, the faithful dog following at her heels.

Nothing worthy of mention occurred on the way, and in due time she reached her destination as shown.

No answer came to her inquiry, and she called again:

"Is any one down there?"

Still no response.

With nervous haste she proceeded to light the lantern she carried, and that done, she tied the end of the rope to it and let it down into the dark hole.

Many a time when a school-girl she had stopped at this old well to get a drink, on her way to and from school, but that was years ago. She remembered it, and knew just about how deep it was.

When she knew the lantern must be near to the water, she let out the rope more slowly, and peered down.

In a moment more its light fell upon the water.

Then she moved it to and fro, so that she might see every part of the bottom.

She could see distinctly, and there was no one there.

"There is no one there, Rover," she said aloud, "and we have had our walk for nothing. But, oh! I had to come, after that startling dream. It would have haunted me all night."

She pulled up the lantern and wound up the rope, and was about to replace the board when she noticed wet marks upon it.

With beating heart she looked more closely.

"Heavens!" she gasped, "some one has been in the well, and has escaped. Who can it have been? Here are prints of a man's wet feet. Yes, and here are other foot-marks—those of a boy. I must know more about this. Here, Rover, where are you? Here, scent these tracks, and follow."

When the dog ran up its mistress fastened the rope to its collar, and then replacing the board, bade the dog go forward, she holding the rope in order not to lose him.

At first the dog was inclined to bay, but she silenced it, and then followed where it silently led.

In the mean time, when they had started away from their late prison, Mail-boy Mart asked Mr. Paul where he was going.

"I was just glancing around to see where we are," was the answer, "and I find you were right. We were in that old well near the station. I know the place, for many a time—But, you asked where I am going."

"Yes, sir."

"I will tell you, my brave lad. I know where there is an old cabin in the woods not far from here, and as I want to remain in hiding for a day or so, we will go there, if you are willing to go with me."

"An' I am, you bet. I'm with ye, every time. Only for you I'd be a dead boy now."

"And but for you, I would still be at the bottom of the old well."

"I don't know whether ye would or not," Mart opposed. "You're such a ripper at inventin', mebby you'd 'a' hit upon some other plan afore long."

"Impossible. I could have done nothing without you."

"Then we'll have to say much obliged to each other, I reckon, an' call it square."

"We can say 'much obliged,' but that will not square my indebtedness to you. I shall never be able to repay—"

"Say," Mart interrupted, "let's talk 'bout somethin' else. How far is it ter that old cabin?"

"Not far, as I told you. It is only a little distance in the woods, and we shall soon be there."

So they talked, of one thing and another, and in due time the cabin was reached.

And it was an old one indeed. It had neither door nor windows, and its roof could not be expected to afford much shelter against a storm, being full of holes.

"Here we will build a fire," Mr. Paul announced, "and make ourselves as comfortable as a pair of tramps. Many a time, when a boy, have I made a fire in this old cabin and warmed myself when out hunting. But the cabin had doors and windows, then, and was a more comfortable place."

"I don't see how we kin make a fire," observed Mart. "Where is th' matches ter come from?"

"I have a water-proof box in my pocket."

"Oh! I see." It did not take long to find enough wood to start fire with, and as soon as its light blazed up the two strangely-met friends looked at each other.

"You are a likely-looking boy," Mr. Paul observed, "and I like you."

"An' you," returned Mart, "look a good deal like th' Mr. Paul that stopped th' train, but I kin see that ye ain't. I—Great guns! why didn't I think o' this afore? I'd give fourteen years' wages ter know what time it is!"

Mr. Paul smiled at his earnestness.

"Perhaps I can inform you, if my watch has escaped injury, for it, too, is water-proof."

He drew it from his pocket and held it to his ear. It was running.

"It is a quarter past two," he said.

"Good!" cried Mart, "that gives me a quarter of an hour or so to catch th' train, an' I'll do it."

"Do what—catch what train—what are you talking about?"

"I'll tell ye. Ye see th' Night Express is due back here about half-past two, an' I kin go out to th' railroad an' stop her an' git aboard. I kin take this mail with me, bein' a regular carrier, an' give it to Prenty, th' agent. Then I kin tell what I know about Bob an' Hank, th' murderers, an' mebby they kin be ketched afore they git out o' Jersey."

"A good idea—a splendid idea, my lad, and I admire your pluck," said Mr. Paul. "But how will you stop the train?"

"That's easy done. Tom Burgess always has his eye peeled fer danger ahead, an' there ain't nary a lightnin'-bug flies 'cross th' track that he don't see. I'll take a torch o' this fat pine, an' I'll stop him, you bet."

"You have brains, my boy, and your ideas are sound. I have not one word to say against your plan. But you must promise me one thing."

"An' what is that?"

"That is—that you will come back here some time to-morrow."

"I'll do it."

"Very well, then, prepare your torch, and while you are doing that I'll search out my letter. You may look another way, and you will not see me take it. Rest assured that I shall take only what is rightly mine."

"I'm not lookin'," said Mart, "I'm busy as kin be."

Taking the pouch of mail from his shoulders, Mr. Paul hastily searched for and soon found the important letter, and laid it aside.

"Is your torch ready?" he asked, then,

"Yes, all ready," Mart answered, "an' so be I."

"Then let me put this mail-pouch on your back, the same as I had it; there, that is right; and here is my match-box. Can you find your way?"

"Yes, I know which side th' railroad is on, an' that is all that's necessary."

"I will go with you, if—"

"No, no, 'tain't necessary. An' now I'll be off, or I'll be too late. Good-by, an' take care o' yerself. I'll be back ter-morrer."

"Good-by, lad," responded Mr. Paul, "and good luck attend you. You will find me here."

With these parting words, Mart left the cabin and hurried away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII.

MAIL-BOY MART AHEAD.

"BRAVE-HEARTED boy!" Mr. Paul exclaimed, when he was gone, "he shall be well rewarded for this night's work. But for him I would still be at the bottom of that old well, and perhaps dead."

Throwing more wood upon the fire, he stood before its friendly blaze to dry his clothes.

For some minutes he stood silent, and then he spoke aloud his thoughts.

He did not hear the footsteps outside, or see the woman who peered in at one of the open windows.

This was Doxie Howell, and, holding her dog close beside her, she stood as silent and motionless as a statue.

"The end is at hand," Mr. Paul said, as he gazed fixedly at the floor, "and the truth shall be made known at last. When I returned home four years ago, I found my place already filled by another, who laughed me to scorn. I could do nothing. No proof had I, and James Hammond triumphed. I went away as quietly as I had come, but with the resolve in my heart to tear him from the place he usurped and claim my rights. For four years I have worked untiringly, and now success is mine. But I must be careful now. He knows my secret, and this night's work shows me what I must expect from him. He made a bold stroke to put me out of the way, and destroy the proofs, but he failed, and—But, how did he know about the letter? By heavens! there is a traitor somewhere, and he had better take care. And Doxie—Ah! wait a little longer, faithful, patient heart! and you shall know that I am the one for whom you wait—that I—"

A low cry outside startled him. It was a woman's voice, and was like a scream and a groan.

mingled. And it was instantly followed by the loud, deep-mouthed bay of a dog.

Snatching a brand from the fire, Mr. Paul sprang to the door and looked out.

There, upon the ground, lay Doxie Howell, and standing over her was her big dog, Rover.

"My God!" Mr. Paul cried, as he threw away the brand and sprung to lift her up, "can it be Doxie Howell, and here at this hour? What can it mean?"

Tenderly he lifted her up and carried her into the old cabin, and laid her gently down. And then he rubbed her hands to aid in restoring her consciousness.

Presently she opened her eyes, and as they met those of Mr. Paul, she exclaimed:

"St Edmund!"

"Doxie!" he responded.

He assisted her to rise, and then found a large piece of wood for her to sit down upon. The cabin being destitute of furniture, it was the best he could do.

Then he sat down upon the floor beside her, taking her hand.

Mutual explanations followed.

"An' did you not suspect who I was?" Mr. Paul (so we will for the present still call him) asked.

"Not once," answered Doxie, truthfully.

"Why did you not tell me?"

"Because I wanted to wait to surprise you. But, Doxie, what is your answer to 'Mr. Paul' now?"

Doxie's fingers closed over his hand in a fond clasp, and her head drooped a little, but she answered:

"It is the same as before."

"What! Doxie! you do not refuse me?"

"As Mr. Paul—yes. My hand and heart have long been another's, and to him I must remain true."

"Ah! little rogue, I see!" and catching her to his breast he pressed a kiss to her lips, forgetting all about his wet clothes.

And he added;

"And I should have been rescued from my prison anyhow, and by you. I am almost sorry, now, that it was not so. But, you must not remain here, Doxie. I will accompany you home, and—"

"And remain there," Doxie finished. "You shall have dry clothes and a nice bed at once, and—"

"But, I want to remain here in hiding, and—"

"Our house is a better place."

"But, my boy rescuer will return here to find me, and then—"

"I will send our chore-boy to stay here to meet him."

"Still, I—"

"Not another word. We will go at once."

"Well, since you insist upon it, and set aside every objection I can raise, I will go and stay. Here, please to take charge of this letter, as my clothes are so wet. It contains papers that will restore me to my rights."

"I will not lose it."

Mr. Paul then broke down the fire he had built and scattered the brands, and then he set out to accompany Doxie home.

As they were leaving the cabin the rumble of a train was heard, and Mr. Paul stopped to listen. Presently came a short, sharp whistle to stop, and the rumble ceased. A moment later two short whistles sounded, the engine puffed vigorously, and with rumble and roar the train sped on.

"Brave boy!" Paul exclaimed; "he has accomplished his purpose."

Then, as he walked on by the side of the woman he loved, he told her all he could about Mail-boy Mart and their thrilling adventure.

When they reached Doxie's home, Mr. Howell was called up and everything explained to him, and of course "Mr. Paul" was made heartily welcome.

But to return to Mart.

He found his way to the railroad all right, and lighting one of his pine sticks, sat down to wait for the train.

At last it came in sight, and then up the boy sprung and began to wave his torch to and fro across the track.

He was soon seen, and the engineer whistled "brakes," shut off steam, and stopped.

"Well, what in blazes has broke loose now?" he demanded, as the engine stopped.

"It's all right, Tom!" cried Mart, as he clambered aboard the engine. "It's only me, an' I stopped ye ter git aboard. Pull out an' let 'er go."

"Oh, it's you, is it, you young rat?" the engineer exclaimed, and he gave the throttle a half-

angry jerk. "You don't want to count too much on its being 'all right,' for when Weston gets hold of you he'll take your scalp."

"No, I guess not," returned Mart, "fer I have been playin' detective, an' have made a ten-strike."

"What do you mean by that?"

Mart gave Burgess a hurried outline of it all, and then climbed back over the tender and entered the cars.

In the first car he met Weston, the conductor, who was just going over to ask the engineer what he had stopped for.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, as he saw it was Mart; "where did you come from?"

"I stopped the train an' got aboard," the boy confessed.

"What!" cried Weston, "you stopped this train just to get aboard?"

"Exactly. Ye see I've recovered th' mail, an' I've got a clew to th' murderers of Old Roger."

"You have?"

Mart assured him of the fact, and then gave him all the particulars.

"This is important," Weston then agreed. "If those two rascals meant to steal a ride in on a freight, we may be able to catch them at the ferry, unless they have already crossed. I will go over and tell Burgess to stop at the first open telegraph office we come to, and there I'll telegraph to Headquarters."

So saying, the conductor went out and over to the engine, while Mart made his way to the mail-room.

Prentiss, the agent, was enjoying a cigar, having but little to do on the eastward trip as compared with the westward.

"Hello! Prenty, how ye was?" cried Mart, as he flung open the door and entered.

"Great stars!" the agent exclaimed, "is it you, Mart?"

"I reckon it is, what is left of me," the boy answered.

"Where in the world have you been, and what have you been doing?"

"I've been down to Springside, playin' detective, as I said I was goin' to."

"You look as though you had been in a spring."

"So I have—or rather a well."

"The deuce! and was it you stopped the train?"

"You bet!"

"And what is this on your back?"

"That? that's th' U. S. Mail. Just left th' bag over my head, will ye? an' ye kin have it."

The agent complied, and then Mart went on and told him all about his night's adventures, and all he could concerning the mystery at Springside.

Prentiss was greatly interested, and expressed the wish that Mart's clew might bring the murderers to account.

When the boy had finished his narration, the agent examined the mail he had brought, and sorted it out so that it would reach its proper destination.

"Mart," he suddenly observed, "that big letter, the one that man wanted so badly, is gone."

"That so?" queried Mart.

"Perhaps it got lost in the well," the agent suggested.

"I don't see how it could," said Mart, "for we took good care of it all."

Right or wrong, Mart knew that Mr. Paul had saved his life, and he was determined to know nothing about the missing letter.

In the mean time the train had stopped at a telegraph office, and Conductor Weston had telephoned to Headquarters, giving a description of the murderers as he had received from Mart.

When they arrived at Mapleton there was a telegram there for the conductor.

It read as follows:

"CONDUCTOR WESTON:—

"Two men answering description given have just been arrested at the ferry. Bring the boy to Jersey City with you to identify them."

"B ROWLAND, Sup't."

The conductor made haste to find the boy before he could get away, told him what was wanted, and of course Mart was willing to go. He left word for his younger brother to attend to his duties until his return, and then went back to the mail-room.

When the train arrived in Jersey City he was taken at once to the room where the two men were being detained.

The moment the door opened he recognized them, and they turned ghastly pale at sight of

him, an incident that was not lost upon those present.

"Do you recognize them?" asked the officer who had them in charge.

"Yes, sir," answered Mart.

"Who are they?"

"They are the murderers of Old Roger, the carrier, as I heard them own. This one is called Hank and that one is called Bob."

Mart told his story again, and it could not be doubted.

The men were held.

A visit to New York by the detective proved them to be Bob Shiner and Hank Terry, both old offenders.

Next day they were taken to Crawford's and put into jail, Crawford's, as mentioned, being the seat of the county in which the crime had been committed; there to await trial.

And in the mean time, by an earlier train, Mail-boy Mart had returned to Springside to keep his appointment with Mr. Paul.

CHAPTER XIV.

PREPARING A SURPRISE.

At an early hour that morning, about as soon as it was light, Detective Raybold and the eager citizens of Springside were up and looking for a clew to the mystery.

Naturally, their first move was to visit the scene of the crime.

St. Edmund Dare was with the party, and was one of its most active members.

It was the duty of every good citizen, he declared, to do his best to hunt the cowardly murderer down and avenge the old carrier's death, and he was anxious to do his part.

And he agreed with Raybold that the sudden disappearance of Mr. Paul from the hotel—from the town, in fact—might have something to do with the crime. He thought it would be well to find where Mr. Paul was, if possible.

There were some sharp eyes among the searchers, Mr. Dare's seeming about as sharp as the sharpest, and the many tracks leading to and from the old well were soon found.

Owing to the thick, dry dust in the road, nothing very definite could be made out of the tracks, but it was easy to trace them to the field and to the old well.

St. Edmund Dare led the way to the well, having called attention to the tracks, and in a few moments all the party were on the spot.

Some hours had passed since the prisoners' escape, and the wet marks seen by Doxie Howell on the boards could no longer be traced.

But St. Edmund Dare's preternaturally sharp eyes read signs in a way that caused Detective Raybold to open his less acute organs of vision in wonder.

"Some one has been here," St. Edmund declared. "See, these boards have lately been moved. Here are marks of feet around the well. I never knew the cattle to venture so near. I was here only a few days ago, and these boards were nearly overgrown with grass. We must examine this well, gentlemen."

"You are right, you are right," agreed the detective, feeling that his reputation was at stake. "I was about to remark the same thing but you got ahead of me. We must explore the well."

Willing hands quickly removed the boards, and all looked down, in turn.

Of course they could see nothing at the bottom.

"See how the moss is rubbed off the side there," St. Edmund quickly said. "I believe something or somebody has been thrown in here."

"Right, right," agreed the detective, "and I am—Ah! what is this?"

He stooped quickly and picked something up.

It was a knife.

Many of those present recognized it at once.

It belonged to M. Henry Paul.

"There is a mystery here, gentlemen, a more than mystery," declared St. Edmund nervously, "and I am more than anxious to find it out. We want a rope."

"There is one at the station," said Jacobs, the agent. "I will bring it."

He hastened away, and St. Edmund added:

"Whatever this mystery is, that man Paul seems to be concerned in it. It is a very strange affair."

The agent soon returned with the rope, and St. Edmund asked who would be the man to go down.

"I will," answered the detective. "Let me have the rope."

Taking the rope he proceeded to put knots in

it, about two feet apart, to make it easier to climb.

That done, he secured one end to one of the strongest boards, laid the board across the well, and then threw the rope down.

Having made ready, he took off his hat and descended.

When he reached the bottom he lighted matches to enable him to see around, and when he had satisfied himself he returned to the top.

St. Edmund, slightly pale and very anxious, was the first to demand:

"Well, what is there?"

"Two or three little things that I desire to recover," the detective replied. "I want a lantern, and a piece of strong wire about four feet long, with a hook at one end."

"You shall have them at once," said the agent, and away he went to the station again.

"There is no person down there, then?" St. Edmund queried, more pale than ever.

"No" was the answer.

"Well, I am glad, for I almost feared there might be, from all the marks we have seen."

St. Edmund, so we still call the arch rascal, was more uncomfortable in mind than he cared to have his companion see.

He walked a little distance away and back again, to calm his nerves.

"Curse it!" he hissed, "can it be that they have played me false? I will know."

The agent soon returned with the two things the detective had called for, and again Raybold went down.

When next he came up he had the two mail-bag locks, and the top piece of each bag containing the iron eyelets.

"Here," he said, "is what I have found. This old well was chosen as a good place to conceal such damaging evidence. We detectives have a way of getting at secrets, though. Now, what with the sudden disappearance of Mr. Paul, and the finding of his knife here, what are we led to suspect, gentlemen?"

"That he, at the very least, has some important knowledge concerning the crime," declared St. Edmund at once.

Most of the others, who knew Mr. Paul and had all confidence in him, expressed their belief that it was more likely that he, too, had met with foul play.

Of course the question could not be settled then.

It was now time for the station-agent to open his office for the business of the day, and so he left the party and went to his duties.

When he "cut in" his telegraph instruments he found that some one was "calling" him.

He "answered" the call, and the following was what he copied from the clicking "sounder":

"To JACOB RAYBOLD:—

"(Inquire for at hotel.)

"Murderers arrested, and are on the way here. One has confessed. Return. CORONER."

To say that this news created a sensation, is expressing it mildly. It caused a very furor of excitement.

And it was fortunate for St. Edmund that no one noticed him when the news reached him. His face was a picture of consternation and guilty fear.

When the next train came along, which proved to be the one the prisoners were on, the detective, and several of the citizens, too, boarded it and went to Crawford's.

St. Edmund Dare went home in no easy state of mind.

Mail-boy Mart, by an earlier train, had already arrived at Springside, and had gone at once to the old cabin where Mr. Paul had promised to wait for him.

No one was there.

"Well, I can't understand this," Mart reflected, "fur I took Mr. Paul ter be a man o' his word. There ain't no disputin' th' fact that he ain't here, though, an' that's plain. I wonder—Hello! who be you?"

This was addressed to a boy who made his appearance at the door at that moment.

"I'm Howell's boy," was the reply. "Are you called Mart?"

"I reckon I am. What of it?"

"Nothin'—only I was sent here to wait for ye, an' when ye got here I was ter bring ye over to Howell's, where Mr. Paul is."

"Oh, that's th' way th' chicken flies, is it? Well, go ahead, an' I'll foller ye."

The farmer's boy led the way, and Mart went along with him.

When he arrived at the Howell place, his friend, Mr. Paul, was there to greet him, and he was introduced to Mr. Howell and Doxie.

"Well, my lad," Mr. Paul asked, "what came of your venture? I know you got aboard the train all right, for I heard it stop and start on again."

"I've got th' best o' news!" Mart exclaimed. "I told the conductor my little story, he telegraphed ahead to Jersey City, an' when we got to Mapleton there was a message there sayin' two men had been arrested, an' for me to come on an' identify 'em. I went, an' there was Hank an' Bob, as big as life. An' they're now on th' way to Crawford's, I reckon."

"You are a little wonder!" Mr. Paul cried. "You have done a remarkable piece of work, and the detectives will have good reason to envy you."

"I can't see as I've done anything so wonderful," declared Mart, modestly. "I guess any other boy could 'a' done as well."

"I don't agree with you, and I would like to know what has given you such sharp wits and sound ideas for a boy of your age."

"Well," Mart confessed, "I read a good deal, an' when I get hold of a good idea, I remember it."

"Oh! I see. What do you read?"

"Novels, mostly, sir."

"Novels! why, my boy, the newspapers are against—"

"I know they be," Mart interrupted, warmly, "an' it makes me tired. Did you ever read novels, Mr. Paul?"

"I did, when a boy, a great many," the gentleman confessed.

"Did they make you bad?"

"Not a bit. On the other hand, they gave me much information."

"Just so, exactly. Did you ever read one in which th' good didn't overcome th' bad, an' in which th' evil wasn't punished an' honesty rewarded?"

"Never."

"An' don't every one of 'em point out some good lesson, in some way or other?"

"I believe you are right."

"Just so; an' that's what makes me so mad. I tell ye what it is, too. There is readin' matter, an' lots of it, in every newspaper, that no writer could get published in a story, an' that does more real harm than all th' novels in th' world. I tell ye if boys is bad naturally, an' smoke, lie, steal an' swear, novels ain't to blame, for they are against all such, right from th' word 'go!'"

Mr. Paul had to smile at the boy's earnest manner.

"Do your parents know what you read?" he asked.

"I've got only a mother," Mart replied, "an' she does. She buys 'em for me, too, an' at nights I sit an' read 'em, an' she tells me what th' big words mean, an' how to say 'em right. She knows somethin', she does. But there's Joe Hook, whose daddy won't let him look at 'em even, he runs out every night, an' last week he was arrested for stealin'. I tell ye it's bein' let to run wild, an' th' company he keeps, that spoils a boy; not what he reads. Excuse me for talkin' so strong-like, but I can't help. Such howlin' as I hear an' see, from folks that don't know what they're talkin' about anyhow, makes me tired; an' I must say what I think, or bu'st."

"And what does your mother say about the newspapers?" Mr. Paul asked.

"Well, she takes two good ones, weekly, but there's lots of others that she won't have in th' house. Only t'other day I carried one home from th' station, an' lookin' over it I found a word I didn't know. I asked mother what it meant. She got fire red an' said she couldn't explain it, an' that I wasn't old enough to understand it anyhow; an' up she got an' stuck that paper inter th' stove. An' that was one of th' crack newspapers, too. As I said afore, my mother's got sense, an' she says that one-half th' news that's printed is too indecent to be used by anybody."

CHAPTER XV.

THE TABLES ARE TURNED.

THE conversation between Mr. Paul and Mart ran on to some length, and the boy proved himself an able disputant.

When they were done with the question, Mr. Paul asked:

"By the way, is the arrest known here at Springside?"

"Oh! it must be," said Mart, "for it is known all along the line."

"Then I must act at once, and I want you to do me a favor. I will write some telegrams,

which you will please take to Mapleton with you and have them forwarded from there. Will you do this?"

"Certainly."

"Very well. And then to-night, early, if you desire to know more about me, return here and accompany Mr. and Miss Howell to my house."

"I'll be on hand, you bet."

The telegrams were soon written, and taking them, and the money to pay for their transmission, Mart hastened away to catch the next train to Mapleton.

When he was gone, Mr. Paul held an earnest conversation with Mr. Howell and Doxie, the result of which was that Mr. Howell hitched his team and set out for Crawford's immediately.

As soon as their conversation was ended, Mr. Paul retired to the room which had been made his, and there he cut off all his beard and shaved his face clean.

This done, any one could easily recognize him as the original of the photograph which stood on the mantle in Doxie's room.

The hour was yet early, and taking leave of Doxie, he set out (by a circuitous route to avoid meeting any one) for Dare Manor.

When he arrived there, he approached the house from the rear, and entered the old-fashioned kitchen as boldly as he had done a thousand times when a boy.

Two old servants were there, and at sight of him they both opened their eyes to the widest and stood speechless.

"Do you not know me?" calling them by name.

The servants knew not what to say. Here, as their eyes and memory told them, was St. Edmund Dare; and yet how could it be?

"Do you not know me?" the man repeated. "I am St. Edmund, home at last."

"It is—it must be so!" both the servants cried, "and—"

They stopped. There was yet a doubt, and they knew not what to say or do.

Mr. Paul came to their aid. He called them aside, and a long conversation followed, in which he told them everything. And they almost cried for joy.

He told them of his plans, and they promised their hearty co-operation.

Leaving them, then, the heir went to the library and seated himself in the well-remembered big chair in which his father had sat, and his father before him.

It was not long when he came.

He entered the library, but at the sight of the real heir, he reeled back as though he had been shot, and his face became deathly white.

"St. Edmund Dare!" he involuntarily exclaimed.

"Yes, James Hammond," the real heir said, coldly and deliberately, as he drew a revolver, "and the end is at hand."

The false heir recoiled, and his face became perfectly ghastly. He realized that he was lost.

"Sit down, James Hammond," St. Edmund commanded, "and listen to my words. And if you attempt to escape, or make one treacherous move, I will shoot you down like a dog."

The rascal had no choice but to obey.

St. Edmund read the chapter of the past, then, and brought home to the evil wretch the crimes he was guilty of, handling him without gloves.

And he ended by ordering him to write notes of invitation to many prominent families of the neighborhood, requesting their attendance at the manor at eight o'clock, which he did.

Then St. Edmund had him securely bound, and when later two men arrived from the city—two detectives they were, he placed him in their keeping.

Evening came, and most of the invited guests arrived. They were shown into the large parlor by servants who informed them that they had been called there on a matter of business, and that St. Edmund would soon be in.

After a time a middle-aged gentleman entered the room. He was a stranger to all present. Advancing to a table he laid some papers down upon it, and then turning to the company said:

"Ladies and gentlemen: I am John Bondwell, of the firm of Higgins & Bondwell, New York. You have been summoned here this evening to witness the righting of one of the greatest wrongs that has ever come under my professional notice. If you will give me your attention for a few moments I will make my meaning plain."

All present, save Mr. Howell and Doxie, were

more than surprised, and wondered what could be coming.

"Nearly twenty years ago," the lawyer went on, "young St. Edmund Dare left this paternal roof to travel abroad. His father, without the knowledge of the young man, employed a trusted friend to follow him and protect him. That man's name was Hammond, and of him you knew, and know, little or nothing. He had a son, James, who was about the same age as St. Edmund, and the two boys did not look greatly unlike each other. No more was heard from the young man until about five years ago. Then, as you know, he and his guardian returned, the young man proved his identity, and he has since lived here among you. But, my friends, that man was not St. Edmund Dare, but James Hammond."

A bombshell could hardly have created more surprise.

"It is true," the lawyer continued, "and I have the proofs. At the time when James Hammond came here as St. Edmund Dare, the real heir was being held in bondage by a band—or tribe—of Tartars, to whom the Hammonds, father and son, had sold him as a slave. The young man made his escape, though, and arrived home about a year later only to find his place usurped by another, whose proofs of identity seemed to be undisputable. Since that time he has been constantly at work to oust the usurper and gain possession of his rights. With your permission, now, I will introduce you to the genuine St. Edmund Dare."

A door opened, and St. Edmund, noble-looking and handsome, entered the room.

He was recognized instantly by all who had known him as a boy, and for some moments confusion reigned, as all pressed around him eager to grasp his hand.

When order was restored, St. Edmund said:

"What you have just heard from Mr. Bondwell is true. My father's friend proved a traitor. When I made my escape, and came home, I was not surprised to find James Hammond in my place. He laughed me to scorn, and I went quietly away. Very fortunately I succeeded in gaining the assistance of such able men as Higgins & Bondwell, and now I am prepared to establish my identity in spite of all my enemies. Some months ago I came here as M. Henry Paul—" exclamations of wonder, "and have been waiting for final proofs before making myself known to you. But James Hammond learned who I was—"

"Thanks to a traitor in my office, who is now under arrest," interrupted Mr. Bondwell.

"And who led me into a trap that almost proved fatal, by sending me a bogus telegram," added St. Edmund. "James Hammond hired two rascals to murder me, and last night they came here to do the deed. A telegram led me down to the station, and there they fell upon me and threw me into the old well near by. Old Roger Blake witnessed the crime, and they killed him. The particulars of that crime you know."

St. Edmund went on, then, and gave all the particulars that are known to the reader.

When he had done, James Hammond was led into the room, handcuffed, as were Bob Shiner and Hank Terry. To deny their work was useless, especially as Bob Shiner had confessed his guilt, and they publicly denounced James Hammond as the man who had employed them.

Mail-boy Mart was there, a witness to it all, and he presently advanced to where the three rascals stood, and said:

"This does me good, it does. You are two purty birds, and you're another. Mebby you're sorry now ye wasn't honest men. I tell ye there's nothin' pays like bein' square an' honest, fer in th' long run th' man that's honest wins th' plum. I spose you'd like ter know how we got out o' that well, but it ain't necessary ter tell ye. We got out, you bet!"

Cheers greeted the boy's words.

St. Edmund went on, then, with every particular of the case. The india-ink mark which he had had on his arm, but which James Hammond could now show upon his, had been copied by an East Indian, and the original on St. Edmund's arm had been removed. To prove this, the very man who had performed the work had been found and brought to America for that purpose. He could speak English, and when brought face to face with St. Edmund and the arch-rascal, he owned that the transfer—so to call it—was his work.

The man who had tried to bribe the mail-agent on the Night Express to deliver the large letter to him, was Hammond, he having been notified by the traitor in the lawyers' office

when it would be sent. Mail-boy Mart recognized him at once.

All the other points were brought out, everything was made clear, St. Edmund's identity and James Hammond's guilt could not be doubted, and the three prisoners were led away to jail.

Then followed a scene of wild welcome to the real heir, and a happy evening was passed.

And Mail-boy Mart came in for a full share of the glory of the hour.

CHAPTER XVI.

LAST LINES.

THE three rascals were tried, convicted, and duly hanged.

Before his execution, James Hammond made a confession in full, in which he owned to having poisoned his own father to get him out of the way after the success of their scheme was assured.

Old Roger Blake, the murdered carrier, was buried at Springside, and St. Edmund Dare marked his grave with a handsome and costly stone.

Job Clark, as Higgins & Bondwell's rascally clerk was named, was sent to prison for a goodly term, as were some others whose dark doings were brought to light at the same time.

Jacob Raybold, the detective, had little to congratulate himself upon in his share in the case, but he took it all in good part and yielded the honors gracefully to Mail-boy Mart.

There was a grand wedding at Springside ere many weeks rolled by, and St. Edmund Dare and Doxie Howell were made one.

After many years of patient waiting, Doxie was rewarded at last. But St. Edmund considered his reward greater than hers. She had been tried and found true.

All the other good people of our romance are living, enjoying the honor and peace that come as a reward for honesty and uprightness. Lew Weston, the conductor; Tom Burgess, the engineer; and many other of the railroad men are still at their posts. In the mail-room of the Night Express, however, a new face is now seen. It is Mail-boy Mart, who is now route-agent on that line in place of Henry Prentiss, the latter having been promoted to a higher position.

St. Edmund Dare wanted Mart to accept a large reward, and live without work all his life, but the boy would not hear to it. He did, however, agree to attend school until he became of age, and then Mr. Dare used his influence to gain for him the position he coveted.

And there Mart is to-day, a favorite with all who know him, and in a fair way to work his way to a much higher position in the near future.

Whenever he catches the mail on the fly at Springside, he remembers the night when Old Roger's body was caught by the crane, and he cannot help the shudder the thought gives him. He often speaks of that night to his friends, and by many of them he is still called Mail-boy Mart, the Night Express Detective.

THE END.

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BY CAPTAIN FRED. WHITTAKER.

15 The Sea-Cat; or, The Witch of Darien. 29 The Dumb Page; or, The Doge's Daughter. 43 Dick Daring, the Pony Express Rider. 150 Lancendino Bassotto; or, The Children of the Chaco. 154 The Sword Hunter; or, The Land of the Elephant Riders. 159 The Lost Captain; or, Skipper Jabez Coffin's Cruise to the Open Polar Sea. 200 The Boy Bedouins; or, The Brothers of the Plumed Lance. 214 Wolfgang, the Robber of the Rhine. 249 Milo Romer, the Animal King; or, The Round the World Wanderer. 265 The Tiger Tamer; or, The League of the Jungle. 381 Black Niek, the Demon Rider. 395 California Joe's War Trail.

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284 Old Rocky's "Boyes"; or, Benito, the Young Horse-Breaker. 246 Giant George; or, The Ang'l of the Range. 275 Arizona Jack; or, Giant George's Pard. 297 The Tarantula of Taos; or, Giant George's Revenge. 307 The Strange Pard; or, Little Ben's Death Hunt. 318 Ker-whoop; or, The Tarantula of Taos. 321 Creeping Cat, the Caddo; or, The Red and White Pards. 323 Frio Fred; or, The Geronimo's Tramps. 344 The Fighting Trig; or, Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway. 349 Wild Whiff; or, Big Foot Wallie to the Front. 357 The Ranch Raiders; or, The Siege of Fort Purgatory. 364 Snap-Shot, the Boy Ranger. 375 Chisht, the Creek; or, The Three Thunderbolts. 381 Bandera Bill; or, Frio Frank to the Front. 392 Romeo and the Reds; or, The Beliegated Ranch. 404 Little Larlin; or, Pecan Pete's Big Rampage. 414 The Daisy from Denver. 427 The Three Trailers; or, Old Rocky on the Rampage. 442 Blue Bill; or, The Lynx of the Leon. 455 Little Lone Star; or, The Belle of the Cibolo.

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167 Asa Scott, the Steamboat Boy. 199 Featherweight the Boy Champion of the Muskingum. 223 Ozark Alf; or, Featherweight Among the Outlaws. 282 The Typo Detective; or, Weasel, the Boy Tramp. 295 Fearless Phil; or, The King of Quartzville. 311 The Roving Sport; or, The Prince of Chuckaluck Camp. 322 Nemo, the Detective; or, Kit Kenyon's Vendetta. 340 Clip, the Contortionist; or, The Montana Vigilantes.

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360 Silver-Mask, the Man of Mystery. 369 Shasta, the Gold King; or, Seven Years Dead. 420 The Detective's Apprentice; or, A Boy Without a Name. 424 Olympia John; or, Red-Hot Times at Ante Bar. 439 Sandy Sam, the Street Scout. 467 Disco Dan, the Daisy Duds. 490 Broadway Billy, the Bootblack Bravo. 506 Redlight Ralph, the Prince of the Road. 514 Broadway Billy's Boodle. 524 The Engineer Detective. 536 Broadway Billy's "Dimmility." 548 Mart, the Night Express Detective. 557 Broadway Billy's Death Racket.

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256 Young Kentuck; or, The Red Lasso. 270 Blizzard Ben; or, The Riot at Keno Camp. 286 Josh, the Boy Tootfoot.

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.

78 Blue Dick; or, The Yellow Chief's Vengeance. 87 The Land Pirates; or, The League of Devil's Island. 137 The Helpless Hand; or, Backwoods Retribution. 259 The Gold-seeker Guide; or, The Lost Mountain.

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306 Neck-Tie Ned; or, The Dug-Out Pard. 346 Red-Ridge Raphael; or, The Swordsman of Zacatecas. 391 Kid-Glove Kit, the Dandy of the Rockies. 398 Kid-Glove Kit and Pard; or, The Gold King. 406 The Mad Man-Hunter; or, The Mystery of Golden Gulch. 505 Powell's Pard; or, The One-Armed Giant.

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89 Island Jim; or, The Pet of the Family. 91 The Captain of the Club; or, The Rival Athlete. 101 Jack Harkaway in New York.

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11 The Two Detectives; or, The Fortunes of a Bowery Girl. 76 Abe Colt, the Crow-Killer. 79 Sol Ginger, the Giant Trapper. 233 Joe Buck of Angels and His Boy Pard. 447 New York Nat, A Tale of Tricks and Traps in Gotham. 458 New England Niek; or, The Fortunes of a Foundling. 464 Nimble Niek, the Circus Prince. 493 Tom Ted, the Arizona Sport. 510 Cool Colorado, the Half-Breed Detective. 518 Cool Colorado in New York.

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86 Dandy Rock, the Man from Texas. 90 The Dread Rider; or, The Texan Duellist. 99 The Tiger of Taos; or, Dandy Rock's Angel. 115 The Mad Miner; or, Dandy Rock's Doom. 131 The Golden Hand; or, Dandy Rock to the Rescue. 164 Dandy Rock's Pledge; or, Hunted to Death. 173 Dandy Rock's Rival; or, The Haunted Maid of Taos.

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34 Oregon Sol; or, Nick Whiffles's Boy Spy. 46 Glass-Eye, the Great Shot of the West. 54 The Big Game; or, the Bow Trapper. 56 Nick Whiffles's Pet; or, In the Valley of Death. 60 The White Indian; or, The Scout of the Yellowstone. 70 Old Zin's Cabin; or, The Greenhorn in the Woods. 81 Lightning Jo, the Terror of the Prairie. 85 Buck Buckram; or, Bess, the Female Trapper. 247 Old Grizzly and His Pets; or, The Wild Huntress. 251 Light-house Lige; or, Oseola, the Firebrand. 257 The Lost Hunters; or, The Underground Camp. 288 The Scalp King; or, The Human Thunderbolt.

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292 Sancho Pedro, the Boy Bandit. 301 Leadville Niek, the Boy Sport. 312 Redtop Rube, the Vigilante Prince. 333 Brimstone Rob, and His Lighting Horse Quartette. 352 Tombstone Tom, the Arizona Boy of "Sand." 359 Durango Harry, the Young "Giant" in Wasterville. 371 Kingbold Chris, the Young Hard-Shell Detective. 380 Avalanche Alf, the Foothills Guide. 390 Jaguar Joe, of the Mount-in-Mall-Line.

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 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
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 434 Jim Beak and Pal, Private Detectives.
 438 Santa Fe Snl, the Slasher.
 486 Sealskin Sam, the Sparkler.

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8 Kansas King; or, The Red Right Hand.
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 55 Deadly-Eye, the Unknown Scout.
 68 Border Robin Hood; or, The Prairie Rover.
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 17 Ralph Roy, the Boy Buccan er; or, The Fugitive Yacht.
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 111 The Secret of Hell Gate.
 116 The Husker Captain; or, The Hermit of Hell Gate.
 197 Little Grit; or, Bessie, the Stock-Tender's Daughter.
 204 Gold Plume; or, The Kid-Glove Sport.
 216 Bison Bill; or, The Prince of the Reins.
 223 Grit, the Bravo Sport; or, The Woman Trailer.
 229 Crimson Kate; or, The Cowboy's Triumph.
 237 Long Star, the Cowboy Captain.
 245 Merle, the Middy; or, The Freelance Heir.
 250 The Midshipman Mutineer; or, Merle Monte's Treasure Island.
 263 The Gold Ship; or, Merle, the Condemned.
 276 Merle Monte's Cruise; or, The Chase of "The Gold Ship."
 280 Merle Monte's Fate; or, Pearl, the Pirate's Bride.
 284 The Sea Marauder; or, Merle Monte's Pledge.
 287 Billy Blue-Eyes, the Boy Rover of the Rio Grande.
 304 The Dead Shot Dandy; or, Benito, the Boy Bugler.
 308 Keno Kit; or, Dead Shot Dandy's Double.
 314 The Mysterious Marauder; or, The Boy Bugler's Long Trail.
 377 Bonodell, the Boy Rover; or, The Flagless Schooner.
 383 The Indian Pilot; or, The Search for Pirate Island.
 387 Warpath Will, the Boy Phantom.
 392 Wolfie, the Boy Lieutenant.
 402 Isidor the Boy Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
 407 The Boy Insurgent; or, The Cuban Vendetta.
 412 The Wild Yachtman; or, The War-Cloud's Cruise.
 429 Duncan Bare, the Boy Refugee.
 433 A Cabin Boy's Luck; or, The Corsair.
 437 The Sea Ralder.
 441 The Ocean Firefly; or, A Middy's Vergeance.
 446 Haphazard Harry; or, The Scapgeare of the Sea.
 450 Wizard Will; or, The Boy Ferret of New York.
 455 Wizard Will's Street Scouts.
 462 The Born Guide; or, The Sailor Boy Wanderer.
 468 Neptune Ned, the Boy Coaster.
 474 Flora; or, Wildcat, the Wild and Pard.
 478 Henry Alford; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
 487 Linda Yed, the Revolver Ranger.
 495 Arizona Joe, the Boy Pard of Texas Jack.
 497 Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys.
 503 The Royal Middy; or, The Shark and the Sea Cat.
 507 The Hunted Midshipman.
 511 The Outlawed Middy.
 520 Buckskin Bill, the Comanche Shadow.
 528 Brothers in Buckskin.
 530 The Buckskin Bowers.
 535 The Buck Skin Rovers.
 540 Captain Ku-Klux, the Marauder of the Rio.
 545 Lieutenant Leopold of Lantoo.
 549 Billie's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
 555 The Creole Corsair.
 560 Pawnee Bill, the Prairie Shadower.
 565 Kent Kingdon, the Card King.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
 122 Phil Hardy, the Boys' Boy.
 126 Plinyone Pete; or, Arcturus, the Dog Detective.
 130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
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 147 Will Wildfire the Thoroughbred.
 152 Black Rose, Will Wildfire's Racer.
 157 Mike Merry, the Harcer Police Boy.
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 165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
 170 A Tramp Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
 174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
 179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
 183 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
 187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
 189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
 196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
 201 The King of the Ticks.
 212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
 220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
 225 Sam Charcoal, the Permanent Darky.
 235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
 242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
 252 Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.
 262 The Young Sharps; or, Rellicking Mike's Hot Trail.
 274 Jolly Jim, the Detective Apprentice.
 289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
 298 The Water-Hound; or, The Young Thoroughbred.
 302 Dashaway, or, Dakota; or, A Western Lad in the Quaker City.
 321 Philip Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
 341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
 353 The Reporter-Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
 367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
 379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Blonds of the Boulevard.
 403 Firefly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
 425 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
 428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
 456 Billy Brik, the Jolly Vagabond.
 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Heavy.
 484 Wild Dick Rockett.
 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
 566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.

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2 Yellowstone Jack; or, The Trapper.
 48 Black John, the Road-Agent; or, The Outlaw's Retreat.
 65 Hurricane Bill; or, Mustang Sam and His Pard.
 119 Mustang Sam; or, The King of the Plains.
 136 Night-Hawk Kit; or, The Daughter of the Ranch.
 144 Dainty Lance, the Boy Sport.
 151 Panther Paul; or, Dainty Lance to the Rescue.
 160 The Black Giant; or, Dainty Lance in Jeopardy.
 168 Deadly Dash; or, Fighting Fire with Fire.
 184 The Boy Trailers; or, Dainty Lance on the War-Path.
 205 The Boy Pards; or, Dainty Lance Unmasked.
 211 Crooked Cale, the Caliban of Celestial City.
 310 The Barranca Wolf; or, The Beautiful Decoy.
 319 The Black Rider; or, The Horse-Thieves' League.
 333 Old Double Fist; or, The Strange Guide.
 355 The King of the Woods; or, Daniel Boone's Last Trail.
 419 Kit Fox, the Border Boy Detective.

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5 Vagabond Joe, the Young Wandering Jew.
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 31 Keen-Knife, the Prince of the Prairies.
 41 Lusso Jack, the Young Mustanger.
 58 The Border King; or, The Secret Foe.
 71 Delaware Dick, the Young Ranger-Spy.
 74 Hickory H. H. H. H. H. the Young Trapper-Ranger.
 83 Rollo, the Boy Rumper.
 134 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.
 149 Seal-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.
 146 Silver Star, the Boy Knight.
 155 Eagle Kit, the Boy Demon.
 163 Little Texas, the Young Mustanger.
 178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
 182 Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.
 202 Prospect Pete; or, The Young Outlaw Hunter.
 208 The Boy Hercules; or, The Prairie Tramps.
 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
 224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
 238 The Farson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
 242 The Blackfeet Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
 260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
 272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy.
 309 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
 314 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
 417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.
 422 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
 444 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Paha-Sau.
 465 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
 473 Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic.
 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trooper.
 562 Blundering Bassi, the Hermit Boy Trapper.

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23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '75.
 27 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
 47 Nightingale Nell; or, The Forest Captain.
 64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trails.
 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
 123 Klown Charley, the White Mustanger.
 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
 155 Gold Trigger, the Spy; or, The Girl Avenger.
 160 Tomando, or, The Right Pick from Red Core.
 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
 198 Arkansas Nick; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tompkin's Crusade.
 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
 255 Captain Apoll, the King-Pin of Bowie.
 267 The Buckskin Detective.
 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowie Blade of Cochetopa.
 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Buly.
 316 Old Eclipse, Tramp Card of Arizona.
 326 The Ten Pard; or, The Terrible Take-Notice.
 345 Big Benson; or, The Last of the Law.
 351 Old Man-Mountain; or, Red Thunderbol's Secret.
 354 Old Sam - or, Part I; or, The Terrible Six.
 366 Vulture Foot, the Indian Detective.
 386 Captain Cutlass; or, the Bum-Boys' Girl Fee.
 396 Rough Rob; or, The Win Champions of Blue Blazes.
 411 The Silken Lusso; or, The Rose of Ranch Robin.
 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter.
 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
 445 The City Vampires; or, Red Rose's Pigeon.
 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
 477 The Excisor Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
 499 Single Sight, the Eye-Ever Sport.
 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
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 515 Jack-in-the-Pulpit; or, The Pest Detective.
 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
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